

① SIGNET-451-5776-52.95

*A fiery Russian beauty  
is caught in a raging whirlwind  
of love and violence*

# MARINA

BY  
**LAURA  
BLACKMON**



## THE EVE OF MARRIAGE— AND THE EDGE OF DANGER

Marina should have been the happiest of young women in glittering St. Petersburg. She had been chosen among so many beauties to be wife to one of the most powerful figures in the czar's court—Viktor Rogozhin, a man whose word was law and whose slightest whim was a supreme command.

But now the lips that pressed against hers, the arms that held her, the hands that caressed her, were not his—but belonged to his infamously disreputable, scandalously handsome cousin, Sergei.

Even as Marina struggled to fight off both Sergei and the tide of desire rising within her, she shuddered to think what would happen if her future husband discovered them together.

She did not have to wait long to find out. . . .

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*Laura Blackmon*



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SIGNET, SIGNET CLASSICS, MENTOR, PLUME, MERIDIAN AND NAL BOOKS are published by The New American Library, Inc., 1633 Broadway, New York, New York 10019

First Printing, April, 1981

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



# 1



Black, ominous clouds darkened the sky over St. Petersburg that July of 1914. The heavy thunderclouds gathered and swelled on the horizon over Lake Ladoga, doing their best to spoil the sunny splendor of the city by the Neva, and by late afternoon the dark, forbidding skies had emptied the boulevards of all but the bravest souls.

Lashed by the fierce whistling wind, heralded by sharp claps of thunder that set the windows trembling and the dogs howling, the hard rain broke at last. It spattered against the massive bronze doors of the Kazan Cathedral and hurled itself against the proud Corinthian columns of the Alexandra Theater. It shook the great alder trees along the Nevski Prospect, tearing mercilessly at the leaves that had burst forth only a few short months before and had not yet darkened beyond a pale green. Flashes of ragged lightning tore the sky as the rain danced down the boulevards and beat upon the glistening bronze statue of Peter the Great. But he sat stolidly in the downpour, immovable, unshaken on his rearing mount, as impervious to the vagaries of nature as he had been to the trials of life, and following his lordly example, the citizens of St. Petersburg took shelter from the rain and shrugged philosophically as the hurricane roared around them.

In the magic of that particular summer, no one in St. Petersburg had the time to concern himself about the rain. No one could remember a gayer, more glittering season. The ladies strolling on the English Quay by the Neva in their white lace summer gowns by Worth and Molyneux of Paris had never seemed lovelier, the handsome young cadets in their red-and-blue uniforms never more dashing. The streets were thronged with elegant men and flirtatious women, and the crowds gathered in the warm summer nights to dance under the Japanese lanterns in the parks and squares where the musicians played their accordions and balalaikas in jaunty kiosks.

If, in the Winter Palace, the czar's ministers and the representatives of the Duma shook their gray heads over the precarious political situation, that was their affair. Let the lights burn late into the night at Tsarkoe Selo while the old men belabored the Balkan Question. What did the shooting of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his portly Archduchess at Sarajevo have to do with Russia? Sad, certainly, but the good Lord had never intended anyone for immortality, and by now the imperial couple were at peace and far beyond mortal cares. The Austrians were understandably angry, as well they should be over this vexing contretemps, and of course Russia felt sympathetic, having had more than her share of assassinations and attempted assassinations in recent years.

But meanwhile, here in St. Petersburg, there were so many thrilling distractions that it was impossible to feel sad for long. There were the new automobiles to ride, and aviators to cheer at the Imperial Airfield on Gutuevski Island. There were scores of paintings to see at the Hermitage—haunting Vandykes, opulent Rubenses, and delicate Tintoretos. There were dazzling gardens to visit at the Winter Palace, there was the theater to attend, the music of Rachmaninoff and Rimski-Korsakov to enjoy, Gogol and Gorky to read, a pantheon of poets to weep and sigh over, and above all, the beloved Maryinsky Ballet. Why, only this year the Maryinsky had gone to Paris, where the French had acclaimed the dancers of St. Petersburg with fevered enthusiasm. Divine, peerless, perfect, the French press cried, depleting its store of superlatives: Karsavina, breathtaking; Pavlova, sans pareil; Diaghilev, a genius; Nijinski, a god. Excellent, the papers raved, exquisite, unexcelled anywhere in Europe.

In the midst of this plethora of art and delights, who had time

for the sorrows beyond the golden gates of St. Petersburg? Who had time to wonder or care what dark thoughts filled the minds of the felt-booted moujiks and the rustic Tartars? Did it really matter that a German named Marx had called to the apprentices and the laborers to shake off their chains? What chains? And what was all the fuss about? Who could live in St. Petersburg and not be glad? Even the poor—were they not also in the most beautiful city outside of Paradise? Besides, Marx or no Marx, there had not been a really serious uprising since 1905, and the police and the cossacks had taken care of that. The rebels had learned their lesson, and another bloodbath was not likely to happen again. Let the malcontents create their little disturbances, let them rave and rant and scribble their slogans on the walls of the university; the Okhrana would take care of them if they became too troublesome.

The rounds of elegant balls and parties and receptions were in full swing that summer, with the titled aristocrats and the leaders of the demimonde vying in the opulent splendor of their entertainments. The *jeunesse dorée* and the artists drank and danced to the violins at the Blagoyeshtcheskaya, their favorite restaurant, until the small hours of the morning. The ladies and gentlemen of polite society repaired to the Imperial Yacht Club on the elegant Morskaya Street, or to the exclusive Imperial Automobile Club on Dvortzovaya Naberezhnaya, the czar's favorite club. Or they returned home to their villas and their palaces and entertained their friends for lavish late suppers.

On the surface, the two groups seemed so friendly that there appeared to be almost nothing to choose between the aristocrats of blood and the aristocrats of talent, so richly were they all dressed, so banal were the pleasantries they exchanged. And it was not unusual for aging princesses to take what were euphemistically referred to as "protégés" from the group of young actors and writers. It was also accepted—expected even—that the young counts and princes would choose their mistresses from among the lovely women who performed in the theaters. If they wanted to keep a lovely actress or a graceful ballerina, to shower her with presents and spoil her with jewels, so be it. Let them sow their wild oats in the arms of these women.

But under this elegant sophistication existed a hard reality which no amount of gay banter could dispel. As invisible as the line between the artists and the aristocrats might seem, it was

there, and it was made of iron. For while the grand ladies sat in their boxes at the Maryinsky Theater and applauded the actresses and dancers, and while they were perfectly willing that their sons, and often their husbands, courted these creatures, it would never do to invite these women into their homes or admit them into the rigidly prescribed perimeter of their social circle. It was understood by all, and from the beginning, that the artists would not be accepted into the higher ozones of St. Petersburg society, and that even at best, their status was never more than that of an elegant prostitute. Those women who longed to be recognized as the equal of their highborn lovers, and those men who sought to bring them into that world where they themselves had been born, soon discovered, and at their cost, how ephemeral was the friendship of the mighty, and how unrelenting their vengeance.



Sergei Rogozhin, captain of the Twelfth Regiment of the Czar's Cossack Guards, was in an ugly mood as he urged the great shining bay horse through the crowded streets of St. Petersburg. His strong, hard features were set in a determined scowl and his gray eyes had taken on the flat, dark color which was a sure sign that his angry temper was smoldering, ready to explode at any moment. He ran his fingers through his dark hair and winced with pain, silently cursing himself for the foolish bout of drinking that had led him, once again, to this pass. He dimly remembered entering a Gypsy cabaret the night before, with the ostensible purpose of tasting the Russian vodka for which he had so nostalgically longed during his years of exile.

He had been gone for almost half a decade—a long time to thirst for a drink that one had grown unaccountably fond of—but that first drink of Russian vodka was all he wanted of St. Petersburg. He certainly did not want the memories, the drearier picture, of the city that the evening had revived. One drink had become many—he vaguely recalled a dancer moving to the strains of a balalaika, a girl's arms around his neck, her soft body under his, but he had no memory of leaving the place. The deepening purple bruise on his chin was the only evidence that there had

been a brawl. Had he staggered out of there on his own, or had he been helped? All he knew for certain was that this morning he had awakened in his bed at the officers' quarters, and it had taken quarts of strong coffee to clear his head.

His vile humor was only partly due to the immoderate quantity of alcohol he had consumed to celebrate his homecoming. After all, as he had boasted last night, it was an event that merited a toast, or two, or three—he had lost count pretty early on. Five years ago, as a cadet in the same regiment where he was now a captain, he had made the unfortunate but not uncommon mistake of taking up with the wife of a jealous man. A duel had followed the husband's unexpected and untimely return to his wife's apartment, and a single bullet from Sergei's pistol had transformed his loving, passionate mistress into an avenging widow. Weeping prettily over the coffin of her dead husband, she had sworn to have her lover's head. Inexplicable, contrary, but typical of women, Sergei thought darkly.

Unfortunately for Sergei, the outraged husband had enjoyed the post of German ambassador to the czar's court before his demise. This gave his widow a certain leverage, and while she did not have the pleasure of seeing Sergei's head brought to her on a platter, she did contrive, by order of the czar himself, to have him exiled. Doubtless this was accomplished through the intermediary of Alexandra the Czarina, who had preserved a Teutonic taste for blood and vengeance under her veneer of spirituality. So Sergei had left in disgrace, bidding a fond, slightly inebriated farewell to Russia.

He had gone to Paris, where his mother's family had welcomed him with wise, knowing smiles. There he had learned to love the gay French capital. Soon he felt at home with the care-free lightheartedness of his mother's people, so different from the wild fatalism of the Russians. The French love of beauty and their zest for living delighted him.

Now, St. Petersburg seemed a dour and half-savage place by contrast. Here life was made doubly difficult by inclement weather and a distaste of anything that faintly resembled progress.

He looked around him at the teeming life of the streets. Nothing changed, he thought disgustedly. His memory of the Russian capital had been hazed with a nostalgic mist during the five years he had spent in Paris. But nothing had changed—not the potency of the vodka; not the fierceness of the headaches which followed

his bouts of drinking and merrymaking in the taverns; not the city of St. Petersburg. How was it possible, he wondered with ill-natured contempt, that such squalor and poverty should continue to exist here year after year, unchanged, when in Western Europe countries were vying with each other in the race toward progress, proud of their new discoveries and improvements? How was it that the Russians still elected to live in this continual benighted ignorance?

He turned the horse down a narrow alley. The wooden shacks sagged against each other to keep from tumbling. It was warm, but it was getting dark and the street was deserted but for a mangy dog or two foraging around the open doorways for a scrap of food. The smell of onions and rancid cabbage soup filled the air, and Sergei's stomach felt suddenly sick. He shifted his tall, lean body in the saddle, and urged his horse forward. The great bay moved obediently, picking her way delicately through the piles of firewood and refuse that littered the street.

Sergei's head throbbed unmercifully under his officer's cap. Cursing softly under his breath, he wished St. Petersburg and all its inhabitants in the bay of Finland, drowned and forgotten.

Yes, he had wanted to come back. He had heard the rumors of war, and he knew that the peace in Europe was ready to break, and obeying some atavistic impulse which he was at a loss to explain even to himself, he had been seized with a sudden longing to return to the land of his fathers, to offer his sword in her defense on the eve of what he perceived to be an international holocaust.

He had sent a petition, worded in the best diplomatic language. It stated that in spite of his long absence, loyalty to Russia still burned brightly in his breast. He begged the czar to find it within the scope of his compassion to forgive the deplorable and much-regretted incident which had led to the banishment of Cadet Sergei Rogozhin. That same cadet, now wiser and reformed, would be proud to rejoin his regiment or serve in any capacity that might be useful to the empire. Sergei had not hoped for much from this gesture, but it seemed that he still had friends in Russia. In less than two weeks a courier brought him a reply—courteously warm, almost effusive, thanking him for his offer and expressing in florid patriotic language the thanks of the czar and the Russian people for this unexpected but welcomed offer. Enclosed with the letter was a parchment conferring upon

him the captaincy of the regiment from which he had been so unceremoniously ousted five short years before. No mention was made of the unpleasantness which had led to his dismissal.

Sergei now sourly recalled the thrill of pride he had felt at the prospect of fighting under the Russian banner. Picking his way through the crowded, cluttered streets by the Neva, he cursed his impulsive gesture and longed to be back in the gracious, smiling French capital, where life was not oppressive and difficult. The enforced leisure during the long train journey through Eastern Europe had given him ample time to analyze the emotion that brought him running back to Russia, and he knew that the desire sprang as much from his lust for adventure as from patriotism. France was lovely and amusing, but he had become bored with the endless round of parties and receptions, and often longed for the excitement and danger which a man finds only in battle.

For no matter in what terms he couched his desire—patriotism, generosity, a desire to serve the land of his fathers, an ornate form of penance for his earlier disgrace—Sergei Rogozhin was an adventurer at heart, with little time and less patience for the stifling conventionalism of the gambling salon or the smoking room. He belonged to that breed of men for whom life is only precious in that moment they are face to face with death. The thrill of engineering his own survival in the most precarious circumstances was to him as necessary a measure of his own existence as breath is to others. Let the less volatile souls rest content with the sweet rewards of life and ask for nothing more. He had returned to Russia because he knew that war was imminent, regardless of what the optimists caroled joyfully from their soap-boxes and their newspapers. And nothing, not the easy comforts of his life as attaché at the French embassy in Paris, nor the scores of women who begged him through their tears to stay, could keep him from the center of the imminent maelstrom.

But if Sergei Rogozhin was an adventurer, he was not necessarily a fool. He believed in flirting with death, not in jumping uninvited into her bed, and it struck him now that the coming inferno would be the end of Russia. He turned his mare out of the narrow streets into a broader avenue, where the houses of affluent merchants simpered prettily in neat rows. Children played on the streets in the pale violet dusk that was characteristic of the semiarctic Russian night. A boy flipped a ball into the air, tossing it to his playmate, but the whirling sphere missed its



mark and grazed the flank of Sergei's mount. The horse shied, and cursing, Sergei quieted her. Under ordinary circumstances he would have roared at the boys, but his ill-humor and his throbbing headache combined with the memory of his interview with the Grand Duke Frederick at the war ministry that afternoon had left him too dispirited for the usual display. He satisfied himself with a baleful glare in the direction of the urchins, and seeing the thunder in his face, they retrieved their ball and fled.

The idiots! The imbeciles! Sergei thought, his mind back in the carpeted, leather-upholstered quarters of the grand duke. Was it possible that these self-deceiving knaves had persuaded themselves that they were ready for war? Incompetent fools, Sergei seethed, urging the bay into a canter. The czar, frightened, ruled by his wife and the mad monk Rasputin—unable to lead, unaccustomed to command. The generals beneath him more interested in the lineage of their stables of race horses, the cigars that they imported in sealed boxes from South America, and the swell of their mistresses' breasts than in preparing for battle. Sergei smiled grimly. The fools! They were so certain that their world would remain forever unchanged. Certain because they could not imagine any other. But he knew what lay ahead, although the least of his dangerous mood this cloudstreaked July evening was due to thought of his own almost certain death, though that too would be a sacrifice to blind stupidity. The generals' fine horses would soon be pressed into service as line mounts; whatever cigars and other exotic luxuries that came through the squadrons of German U-boats would find their way to the quarters of the English admirals; the mistresses of the Russians would soon forget them and turn their seductive smiles elsewhere when generals were rotting in the swamplands and forests of East Russia with their troops. It was the end for Russia, as unmistakable as the thunderclouds that were darkening the sky overhead.

No rail system, no guns, no ammunition, and no leaders, Sergei muttered to himself. And yet Russia claimed to be prepared for war against a nation that had been openly stockpiling weapons and bullets for more than a decade. He had seen the munitions factories belching forth smoke and turning out their quotas of guns and cannons in the Ruhr-Essen Valley. Everywhere, the landscape throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dotted with the smoking chimney stacks of the factories, and yet Russia sat by, drinking her vodka and congratulating herself

on victories that had been won long before the might of technology had wed itself to the art of war.

Stupid bastards, Sergei cursed. They think a simple mobilization will frighten off the enemy. They imagine that the kaiser will tremble when he sees our disorderly ranks of farmboys armed with pitchforks and scythes against his rifles and cannon. Our troops are badly trained, and there is always the danger of revolution among the ranks—and the Germans know it. They are banking on it. The complacent, smiling face of the Grand Duke flashed through Sergei's mind. The unhurried, gracious carriage of a soldier more suited to playing cards than to leading men.

Suicide, Sergei muttered disgustedly, cursing the Russian high command and himself in the same breath—cursing the foolhardy impulse that had brought him here to witness what he now knew would be a bloodbath brought on by inefficiency and grandiose, unrealistic plans based on the mythology and fantasy of ancient triumphs. Plans that ignored the hard cold fact that Russia was facing a nation which had invested all its skill and energy in arming itself to the teeth.

Not only was the kaiser ready for war—he longed for it the way a criminal longs for forgiveness, or an exile longs for the sight of his homeland—but he would have it at all costs. The assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand at the hand of the terrorist Gavrilo Princip at Sarajevo was exactly the sort of disturbance the kaiser had been waiting for. But ask the Russian high command—the affair in the Balkans was only a disagreeable incident which would blow over in due time. The Grand Duke had referred to it as an "embarrassing contretemps." "We are mobilizing, my dear Rogozhin, for show. Nothing will come of it."

So, with the Austrian lion roaring at the tinsel gates of St. Petersburg, Russia diligently continued her rounds of fetes and parties, the balls and the soirees. It was as if by concentrating on these fatuous pastimes she could somehow stay the impending bloodshed and banish the ugly, tiresome specter of war.

Tonight Sergei himself was attending one of these cursed soirees—a "fete" it had been called on the gilded invitation delivered by a messenger at his quarters: "... a fete to celebrate the wedding of Mademoiselle Marina Konstantinova Lebedev and Count Viktor Alexeyovitch Rogozhin . . ." After a perfunctory glance at the elegant card, Sergei crumpled it in his strong fingers and tossed it aside. But he knew that he would have to

go. Not out of sentiment, certainly, for he had no love for his cousin Viktor, but he suspected that it was Viktor who was the powerful and mysterious force to whom he owed the termination of his exile and his unexpected reinstatement into his regiment, as an officer no less. For Viktor was rich and had considerable influence at the court. Which put him, Sergei, in Viktor's debt, a position he did not enjoy, but which nevertheless dictated that he present himself at his cousin's house to offer his congratulations, such as they were, to Viktor on his wedding. "Married—on the eve of disaster. How like dear Viktor," Sergei grumbled.

Though closely knit by blood—their fathers had been brothers—Sergei and Viktor Rogozhin regarded each other with something less than affection. Sergei guessed rightly that Viktor had interceded at court on his behalf. The motive—family pride, to erase the blot of disgrace from the family escutcheon, not a desire to accommodate Sergei. A wide gulf separated Sergei and his cousin. A gulf of temperament and clashing wills. Viktor, ten years the senior, made no secret that beyond certain inevitable common family ties, he claimed no kinship to Sergei. The fastidious, elegant elder cousin prided himself on his cultural and financial prowess. He was respected and welcomed into the very circles which Sergei abhorred and openly criticized. Sergei was bored by Viktor's balletomania and theatrical enthusiasms—Sergei's interest leaning more to the ballerinas and the actresses themselves than to the artistic value of their performances. He consequently had little patience for Viktor's long-winded discourses on the merits and relative values of this or the other interpretation. What interested Sergei was whether or not *Made-moiselle* of the ballet or theater would be available to join him for an evening's carousing, and later join him in his bed. And with his dashing dark handsomeness, Sergei Rogozhin was not often disappointed.

But for the world of high finance, in which rarefied ozone Viktor was completely at his ease, delighting as he did in the exchange of vast sums of money and in the development of his own fortune, Sergei had nothing but contempt, which he voiced freely. Let Viktor have his power at the court, let him collect his artifacts and build his houses! Sergei was not impressed. All he saw in this was yet another example of the righteous self-interest which was breaking the back of a Russia already bled white by a decaying social apparatus. He could not watch Viktor displaying his tro-

phies—priceless portraits bought in Italy, bronzes from Padua or Firenze, French Madonnas, or English bone china figurines—without wondering if the fortune Viktor had paid for them would not have better been spent feeding the families of the prisoners who slaved in his Siberian gold mines. And, of course, Sergei had never been able to resist voicing these doubts to Viktor himself.

Viktor, needless to say, regarded Sergei with the urbane condescension of the fabulously rich for those beneath them. He hated his infamous younger cousin. He loathed his easy, rollicking zest for life and his outspoken contempt for conventional restraint. In his secret soul, Viktor was afraid of Sergei. He disliked his cousin's flamboyant masculinity and easy charm which appealed universally to women and made him popular with men. And Viktor feared the streak of violence beneath the surface of Sergei's moods, the wildness which caused him, since boyhood, to get involved in increasingly embarrassing scrapes and scandals. Sergei Rogozhin seemed to have a flair for trouble; he was invariably either where danger happened to be or he was the catalyst that caused it to explode. But in the final analysis, the balance of cause and effect between Sergei Rogozhin and disruption counted for little: the result was always trouble. Sergei Rogozhin was a hothead, a stubborn troublemaker, and Viktor despised him for the shadow he had cast over the Rogozhin name.

Still, in spite of his personal feelings, Viktor lived in a world where every choice and decision was dictated by the articles of a long-established and inviolate code of behavior. He had no choice but to invite his cousin to his wedding party. After all, he could hardly pretend not to know that Sergei was back in St. Petersburg, since he himself had engineered the blackguard's return (it had not been easy). No one need know that the platitudes of cousinly love covered Viktor's prayers that Sergei's new captaincy would take him far away, to the backwaters of some distant province perhaps, where, with a little luck, he would break his neck or someone else would break it for him. Besides, it reflected well upon Viktor's patriotism that his own cousin was a captain in the cossack regiment. Viktor's position among the leading financiers of Russia could lead certain parties to question his allegiances. He needed to establish his patriotic ardor as fast and firmly as possible to quiet any rumors of self-serving aggrandizement.

Sergei's great bay cantered gracefully down the broad avenues toward his cousin's house. He was beginning to feel better. The pain in his head was relaxing its grip. In fact, he was looking forward to seeing Viktor again. He was curious to see the woman on whom Viktor would bestow the great honor of being his wife. Sergei laughed inwardly. He had heard that the woman was young, penniless. This intrigued him, for he had never known Viktor to make an arrangement that was not clearly to his financial benefit. Viktor bypassing the time-honored custom of marrying a wealthy woman for her money was too delightful not to be studied at closer quarters. Sergei felt a prick of curiosity to see for himself the future Countess Rogozhin. For a man who had successfully avoided scheming mamas of wealthy, titled, beautiful, and gently reared girls to suddenly take as his wife a woman of no means whatever, and one about whom there were certain unpleasant whispers into the bargain, was strange enough. But when that man was Viktor Rogozhin, the wealthiest and most respectable man in St. Petersburg, it was intriguing indeed.

Laughter twinkled in Sergei's hard gray eyes. The girl must have bewitched Viktor, he thought. Hard, stern Viktor besotted by love? It was too delicious to bear. Made a fool of by some chit? Sergei dug his heels into the mare's flanks and broke her into a gallop.

## 3



A lustrous fall of heavy green velvet curtains parted for an instant to reveal a narrow doorway at the top of the stairs, and the servant girl Keja peered through the banisters at the scene below in breathless delight.

For the full week since she had arrived with her mistress, the household of Viktor Rogozhin had been preparing for this night: the great mansion had been swept and cleaned from attic to cellar, the wood furniture and the floors polished with fragrant lemon oil that made them shine like mirrors, the windows scrubbed until they sparkled, the heavy crystal lustres dismantled and washed piece by piece, so that the cut glass shone like diamonds. Upstairs the guest rooms were opened and aired and the feather mattresses turned and plumped. An army of maids rolled the carpets and carried them into the garden, where they were hung on lines and beaten until even the sturdiest arms arched and not one mote of dust remained to mar the beauty of the rich Oriental tapestries. At long last, after a seemingly endless war waged with dustmops and scouring cloths, Yelena Polorova, the stern, red-eyed housekeeper, had made a final inspection, rustling through the rooms in her voluminous, heavily starched skirts, and pronounced the house ready.

This did not mean that the work was finished, of course, but Yelena Polorova sent the stableboys and the gardener's helpers back to their rightful tasks and let the chauffeur, whom she had enlisted to help move the heavier pieces of furniture, flee back to the garage and tend to the convoy of automobiles in his care. He celebrated his newfound freedom by cursing her roundly to himself, drowning his sorrows in a deep glass of vodka, declaring to his wife that Yelena Polorova was a she-dragon, a monster. "She will meet her match in hell—that vile-smelling she-devil," he muttered.

The work in the great house continued unabated. The redoubtable housekeeper set a fleet of bobbing servant girls to putting the final touches on the preparations. There was linen to iron, fragrant sheets and pillowcases for every room upstairs. The crested silver must be polished, in the pantry there were endless plates and saucers of English china to wipe (the Little Father help the child so clumsy as to drop or chip the precious tableware). The crystal ashtrays and bonbonnières must be cleaned, the ornate vermeil table decorations must shine, and fresh bouquets of flowers from the greenhouse must be cut and set in every room before the guests arrived.

This was not, after all, an ordinary party, even by the standards of a city which only a few months before had celebrated the Youssapov wedding. For tonight, Viktor, Count Rogozhin, master of the house, was to present his young bride-to-be to his friends in the upper circles of St. Petersburg society. The list of the invited included every important name in the city, for Viktor Rogozhin was a member of the elite, well liked and respected by his class. And this was to be the greatest party of the season.

For weeks the ladies had been debating among themselves what frock to wear to the ball, and, more importantly, what attitude to adopt toward Viktor Rogozhin's bride. As one of the most desirable marital prospects on the St. Petersburg horizon, he had disappointed them all by choosing a woman (a girl, really, they told each other) whom in good conscience they could not welcome into their ranks; and yet, he was a man who held too much power, financially, socially, and at the court, to be snubbed. The matter of Viktor's choice was a subject for endless deliberation; this party was a great event and for weeks feminine chatter centered on the color of the dress to wear the night of "her" party. Why, the girl was not even of their class, the infuriated

whispers ran. And tonight, at last, they were to meet her, a girl they knew only by reputation, for she had not been welcomed in their midst—she, the daughter of a dancer, a prima ballerina of the great Bolshoi, it was true, but an "artiste" nonetheless, a "démimondaine," to put it plainly. No, they had not forgotten the glory that had been Tatiana the ballerina, but as celebrated as she was, society was not ready to forget her lowly origins. Born in the back room of some squalid cabaret to a Gypsy mother and an anonymous father. Only her brilliant career with the ballet had put her in the path of Baron Konstanze Gavrilovitch, a young and impressionable officer at the time. He was to become her lover and the father of their child, Marina Lebedev. He forsook both hearth and home (he was already married) for his dancer, and lived with her until his death.

It was forgivable, of course, for the young man to take a mistress from among the "artistes," and no one could begrudge him a youthful fling. God knows, there were worse things for a woman to put up with in a marriage than her husband's mistress, but the outrage of abandoning his wife altogether in favor of his innamorata and their bastard offspring was inexcusable. And a Gypsy. Now the girl, Marina, had succeeded in extracting a contract of marriage from the most eligible bachelor of St. Petersburg. It was not to be endured.

How had she accomplished it? they asked each other over endless cups of tea in the late afternoon. Victor Rogozhin was not an old man, certainly, he was still in the prime of life, but far enough past the first flush of youth to be taken in and deceived by the facile flirtatiousness of a young woman of dubious origin. Furthermore, he was immensely wealthy. His mansion ranked among the finest in the city, and he owned an immense estate in Tyver province. Acres and acres of the richest farmland in all of the Russias were his, along with controlling interests in gold and silver mines in Siberia, Southern Russia and the Manchuria province, and as if this were not enough, there were pied-à-terres in Paris and Vienna as well. While the girl possessed the shift she stood in, and nothing more. Not even a name! Why, then, had this man of taste, discernment, and elegance chosen of all the women on earth the one who had the least to offer him, nothing for dowry, nothing but her tainted blood? Why, even their children would hardly be acceptable in



the polite world. The society patrons smiled grimly. He'll be sorry, they told each other. He'll live to regret it.

The mystery remained, for all their talk. What had she done to bewitch him into marriage? She must have seduced him, there was no other explanation. She had thrown herself at him, probably forcing her way into his bed and convincing him somehow that in exchange for her questionable virtue he owed her the honor of marriage. Nasty slut, but then, she could hardly be blamed: like mother, like daughter. What is bred in the house will come out in the flesh. Blood will tell, they agreed with malicious sagacity. Poor, dear, misguided Count Rogozhin.

But more than one downy lip trembled in disappointment and more than one diamond-spangled maternal bosom heaved as the mothers of marriageable daughters cried, "Why, her, why not my Natalia?" or "my Georgina?" or "my darling Alexandra?" The names changed from household to household, but the underlying sentiment—hatred—was the same. Like a contagious disease, the venom of ill will toward Viktor's young bride spread quickly to the spurned daughters, and at last to the husbands and the fathers of the injured parties, although at first the gentlemen had expressed admiration, liberally laced with envy, for Viktor Rogozhin. In the end, though, their sheepish envy jelled into outrage, and following the example of their wives, they viewed the match with open disfavor in the bosom of their families, though on the outside they held their peace, for Viktor Rogozhin was too powerful a man to cross, no matter what the provocation.

There was another thing that puzzled them. Was Viktor in love with this girl? It was a remote but almost laughable possibility. Count Rogozhin was famous for his cold detachment and his sophisticated, almost sardonic views on love. He had collected as his mistresses the most desirable women of St. Petersburg; there had even been a love suicide or two on his account. But never, at any moment, had even his closest friends known him to feel anything that might remotely be described as love. Had this girl bewitched him, or—and this was the more characteristic, and delicious, possibility—was he planning to use her toward an end which they, his friends, had not yet discovered?

It promised, at the very least, to be a very interesting evening, and the guests fairly trembled with anticipation as their lim-

ousines and horse-drawn carriages slid gracefully into the driveway of Viktor Rogozhin's house.

They were beginning to arrive! From where she peered through the curtain, Keja could see the first guests crossing the great foyer into the salon. She watched the parade of elegant dresses and drank in the rich hues of the velvets and the silks the women wore. She watched with awe the soft shimmer of the diamond parures and the tiaras of the ladies, and she thought of a field of exotic flowers, with the black-clad men in their formal attire like crows. Here and there she picked out a uniform among the stream of guests, mostly ornate affairs worn by portly gentlemen with white, impressive mustaches. The uniforms were liberally decorated with medals and ribbons, and at the distance from which she watched, the scene took on a magical quality that nearly took her breath away. It suddenly seemed that this world, so beautiful, so rich, and forever closed to her, was close enough to touch. For a moment she imagined how it must feel to wear silk next to her skin. She tucked her feet up under her and watched the magnificence below without rancor—and without fear of discovery should one of the ladies or gentlemen look up and see her peeping down—for though the high wall of social convention stood firmly between Russia's ruling classes and those that made the luxury of their lives possible, the less fortunate were allowed, and even encouraged, to peer over the castle walls and admire the throng within. In fact, the wealthy Russians delighted in the admiration of their inferiors, and went to great lengths to flaunt their wealth with an Oriental ostentation that often shocked their less imaginative European cousins, even in an age when display and parade were the rule.

Tonight, Keja thought with delight, the dull routine of her life would be broken by dancing, music, and laughter. Tonight there would be no talk of war, no talk of troops and munitions and mobilization and all the sad, dreary topics that were discussed endlessly wherever one went in the city. Let them talk about the kaiser's ultimatum in the wooden shanties of the Peterhof station, let them worry over conscription of sons and husbands in the taverns and in the slums, but please, she prayed, let them not talk about it here tonight. Tonight belonged to Marina Lebedev; let nothing destroy the magic of this evening for her.

For an instant Keja imagined herself wearing the ivory ball

gown that Marina would wear, sweeping grandly down the polished marble staircase to greet the guests below. She shivered with delicious dread. She was grateful that it was her mistress and not she who would don the lace dress and the glittering necklace that was Viktor's betrothal present and descend these stairs.

A last look at the swirl of color below, and Keja let the rich folds of velvet close over the scene. She smoothed the starched black cloth of her skirt, straightened her lace apron, and patted the cap into place over her auburn braid. It was time to help her mistress dress.

Keja darted down the long hallway that led to Marina's suite of rooms. The house seemed as grand as a palace to her, and she was afraid that she would lose her way and have to seek out one of the house servants and foolishly ask for directions. The nervousness that overtook her when she was outside Marina's apartments was born of the fear of running into Viktor's liveried and sophisticated servants, or even Yelena Polorova herself, and being severely reprimanded. She had not yet acquired the calm imperturbability of the other servants, who were accustomed to lavish parties and a house filled with rich and important guests. She knew that Viktor's domestic staff considered her an intrusion, a nuisance, and well beneath their consideration.

Keja was careful, and she did not lose her way. She slipped through a partially open doorway and ran the last few steps into her mistress's bedroom.

Marina Lebedev's room boasted two ornate electric lamps, and there were small pink bulbs set into brackets on the walls at intervals around the room. They were not lit. Four tall candles set in a shining copper candelabrum sputtered fitfully and fended off the darkness in the drafty room. Keja shut the heavy oak door, and the flames righted themselves gracefully. Sounds of violins from the orchestra below wafted up a faint, distant harmony.

Marina stood thoughtfully in front of the deep oval mirror of the vanity, studying her face and her body with an intent, critical expression. She was naked, and in the warm yellow light of the candles her slim, lithe body was golden, its curves caressed by the play of light. She was beautiful; the high, firm line of her breasts and the proud swelling of her buttocks had the grace and strength so often copied and so seldom captured by even seasoned sculptors. Indeed, she looked like a golden statue, a nubile,

virginal Diana perhaps, as she stood before the glass, totally absorbed in the contemplation of her reflection.

But Keja was not in a contemplative mood. The guests were arriving, and Marina was not even dressed. The servant girl clicked her tongue impatiently.

Marina started, roused from her reverie like a sleeper from a deep slumber. She shook her head, as if to dislodge from her mind the vision of herself in the glass. A tiny frown puckered between her dark, straight brows, and she shook her head. Her mouth curved into a smile that was at once sweetly childlike and defiant, and her eyes became mischievous and rebellious.

"Come, it's late, you must dress now." Keja knew Marina's moods, she was aware that her mistress's high spirits could flare into a tantrum at any moment, without warning. But tonight Marina was happy, and Keja's intrusion on her daydreams did not disturb her. She smiled and snatched a thin silk robe from the bed, clutching it to her breasts in a parody of modesty that made Keja laugh despite herself.

"Marina Konstantinova, you must hurry," Keja said. "I was told that you must be ready to greet your guests by nine o'clock." Keja looked despairingly at the hopeless clutter of brushes and ribbons and crystal perfume bottles that littered the top of the vanity. Marina's dress, which she, Keja, had so carefully ironed with her own hands and laid out on the bed, was now tossed carelessly over a chair. Keja knew, as certainly as if she had been present, that Marina had held it before her in the glass to see how it would look before tossing it aside. The two girls were of an age, and Keja was devoted to her young mistress, but there were times when Marina's unthinking carelessness drove the servant girl to the edge of despair. Keja hurried to the chair, smoothing the ripples of ecru lace and the gossamer folds of silk. She noted with relief that the damage was not extensive and the dress would not need to be ironed again.

"I will go down when I choose to go down." Marina laughed gaily, throwing herself into the chair from which Keja had just swept the dress. Keja was shocked by this declaration of autonomy in a house where the autocratic law of the master was so strictly respected, but she bit her lip. She did not argue—she knew too well that trying to dissuade Marina was a sorry waste of time. But she was afraid for her. Viktor Rogozhin was not a

patient man, and Keja doubted that he would permit his orders to be flouted, even by his lovely, carefree, headstrong bride.

True love was not yet within the realm of Keja's experience, but she was observant enough to have guessed that whatever Viktor Rogozhin felt for Marina, it was not love. Not the kind of love Keja dreamed about. Indeed, Count Rogozhin had barely known Marina at the time of their engagement. Yet he had proposed to her at their first meeting, and it was clear that he ardently desired this marriage to take place. For some reason known only to himself, being accepted by this penniless, homeless girl twenty years his junior represented a major triumph for Count Rogozhin. But what sort of triumph? Marina had not seemed to think his behavior strange, or to care, and Keja was afraid to ask too many questions. She was terrified of Viktor Rogozhin and had no desire to probe the mysteries of his heart.

All Keja knew was that after the railway accident which had claimed the lives of Marina's parents, there had come an invitation for Marina to dine with Count Rogozhin. The invitation said only that he had just heard of her recent bereavement, and as the sometime partner of her father in a mining concern in Siberia, he was anxious to do what he could for Marina.

Would she join him for dinner that evening so that they might discuss her plans for the future? Marina had no one to turn to, and accepted his offer to dine with him. Beautiful, defiant, and brave in a discarded frock of her mother's, Marina met the redoubtable Count Rogozhin. She had no choice but to go; she was penniless and half-starved. For, with all her celebrated talent and her great popularity as a dancer, Tatiana had died with no money of her own, and all the wealth and property of Konstantin Lebedev went, by law, to his legal wife. Thus Marina was left a pauper with the death of her parents.

The friends of Marina's father and what relatives still admitted him to their homes after his scandalous liaison with Tatiana had ignored Marina's pleas for help after his death, some replying that they were unfortunately too busy to see her, and others not bothering to answer at all. Now that Konstantin Lebedev was no longer here to protect her, they delighted in snubbing his bastard child. Marina and Keja were on the verge of destitution; all the furniture in the vast apartment by the Neva had been sold to buy food and a little fuel for the fire. Then Count Rogozhin's letter had come.

What transpired between Marina and the count at their meeting was something that Keja was never to know. When Marina returned to the house, she was smiling for the first time in many months. "He wants to marry me," she said. "And I said yes. He will make them accept me, all those people who hated my mother. All those who hate me because Tatiana's blood runs through my veins. He has promised. As Viktor's wife, I will be the queen of St. Petersburg society. I will say who is to be admitted into the drawing rooms and who is not." Her smile faded. In a taut, hard voice that Keja had never heard before, she added, "I will make them pay."

Now that her hour of triumph had come at last, Marina was exultant. Below, the people who had spurned her once waited to bend over her hand with compliments and good wishes. This was the first part of Viktor's promise to her—he would make them dance at her wedding; he would invite them, and they would not dare refuse.

Keja fought the temptation to ask what Viktor Rogozhin had demanded in return. But on this subject, Marina said nothing. Count Rogozhin wanted her for his wife, and that was all. It seemed to satisfy her. But there had been no courtship, Keja thought, no gala evenings, no walks through gardens, no volumes of poetry exchanged. Nothing but a simple promise, or rather an exchange of promises—mysterious and binding. Promises that changed their lives for the better, to be sure. The count had taken care of them at once, seeing to it that his betrothed and her servant lacked for nothing, providing them with ample funds for food, for clothes, for luxuries. Beyond that, his presence had not really been felt; he had demanded nothing. This added to Keja's fear for Marina. Life was not that simple. Count Rogozhin wanted something in exchange from Marina, but what it was, Keja could not even guess.

One of the candles sputtered and went out. Keja lit it again. Then she scooped the soft, shimmering gown off the bed and held it up. Laughing, Marina slipped out of her chair and made an elaborate pirouette before the glass.

"I shall be so beautiful, so beautiful . . ." She giggled. "They will all die of envy."

Chattering happily, she allowed Keja to dress her.

"Are the Dumilitovs there? Did you see them?"

"No, no. Please hold still," Keja begged, tugging on the

strings of Marina's light corset, pulling in at the narrow waist until Marina gasped for breath.

"Good, that's small enough," Marina said, pulling way from Keja. "Now, I know the Dumilitovs will be here, because Count Rogozhin invited them to please me, and he saw Alexey Dumilitov at a banquet only last week. Alexey assured him that he would come, with his wife and Anushka and Felix, who has just been assigned to his regiment. Imagine!" She laughed. "His wife has been pleading migraines for weeks. 'Oh, my dear Alexey, I couldn't possibly.' But the old witch will be here nonetheless, because he will make her come. He wouldn't dream of offending Viktor. His pasty-faced daughter will be here too. I can already see her, stuffed into some unbecoming gown, hatred and envy burning in her fat little face. Her eyes like two black currants in a flour pastry." Marina clapped her hands together in delight.

"Please be still," Keja implored.

But Marina was far too excited to stand quietly. "Keja, Keja, do you remember how loathsome his wife is, with all her airs, and how she would not let Papa come into her house if Mama was with him? They even refused to come to the funeral because 'that woman Tatiana is to be buried beside Count Lebedev.' 'That woman'—talking about my mother that way—Do you remember?"

"No. She is very ugly. Yes. I remember. Please, Marina, don't wiggle so much." Keja begged. She slipped a ruffled petticoat over Marina's shoulders and tied the ribbon laces at her waist.

"Keja, get me a glass of wine," Marina demanded imperiously.

"No," said Keja in a firm voice, shaking out the layers of lace. "There will be plenty of wine downstairs, and besides, we are running out of time."

But Marina broke loose and ran to the sideboard, where she poured herself a glass of rich red wine from a cut-crystal decanter. She flashed a mischievous smile at Keja. "To the Dumilitovs. To all my dear friends who are waiting for me below," she cried. She tilted the glass to her lips and whisked back across the room to Keja.

"There, I've had my wine." She laughed, seeing Keja's dark look. "Oh, Keja, don't be so serious. Tonight of all nights," she chided.

But Keja was not won over. "Your friends are waiting downstairs, as you say." She glowered. "Are you going to face them in your petticoat?"

"Dear Keja, you are so patient," Marina said ruefully. "Here." She lifted her arms obediently, and Keja slipped the rustling lace dress over her head.

"Can you imagine what they must be thinking down there?" Marina crowed as Keja smoothed the gown into place and began to fasten the long row of buttons down the back. "Me—the illegitimate daughter of Count Konstantin Lebedev and that terrible woman Tatiana—the wife of Viktor Rogozhin. And illegitimate or not, with Tatiana's tainted blood or without it, by tomorrow I shall be Countess Rogozhin. They will have to say, 'Yes, Countess,' and 'No, Countess,' and 'As your Excellency wishes.' I shall go to Tsarkoe Selo and dance with the czar. I will go to the races and wear gowns from Paris. The women will copy the way I dress and ape the way I walk and repeat what I say. I shall steal their husbands, and they will hate me for it. At last I'll give them a good reason to hate me." She laughed delightedly, and Keja gave an inward shudder. She knew better than to interrupt this happy flow of conversation, although she prayed that none of the other servants were lurking behind the door and listening for bits of gossip to repeat. This would make a juicy piece of news, and they could not be expected to understand that Marina often spoke carelessly, without thinking. Also, Keja longed to remind Marina that by tomorrow night she would have taken certain vows which Viktor Rogozhin certainly would mean her to honor.

"Now, sit, please." Keja pushed Marina firmly toward the vanity and began to brush her hair.

Marina peered into the glass anxiously, but the image there was not to her liking. "Oh," she moaned disconsolately as she watched Keja pull the brush through her dark, unruly curls, "if only my hair were smooth, like Mama's." She made a move at her reflection and studied herself critically. Her eyes were large and wide-set, heavily fringed with long, dark lashes which emphasized the unusual violet color of the irises. The shape of her face was triangular, ending in a strong, firm chin that was slightly cleft. Twin dimples appeared in her cheeks when she smiled. Her mouth was wide and full-lipped, too sensual to meet the requirements of the classical, albeit insipid beauty that was the prevailing taste. But while it might not obey the canons of contemporary pulchritude, her mouth provided a perfect counterweight for her startling eyes. Her nose was small and straight,



and she had inherited the high cheekbones and the olive skin of her mother.

Although she was not a "beauty" in the strict sense of the word, Marina possessed a pert, delicate charm of her own which set her apart from the vapid, lovely ladies that were called perfect. And while others prided themselves on languid, swanlike grace, she possessed a dynamic sensuality that could best be described as feline. Even the cast of her face, with its triangular heart shape and its striking eyes, was catlike. Her lean, graceful body, long-necked, slender, was almost boyish, were it not for the swelling roundness of her breasts and the sweet curve of her hips, which proclaimed her very much a woman. She gave the impression of a young, agile animal under whose skin ran a streak of mischief, a captivating sensuality, an invitation into an erotic world of which she herself as yet knew nothing. In her innocence, she possessed the deep, unmistakable sexuality which few women can ever claim, even in the full flush of carnal experience.

But the young girl, the bride-to-be of Viktor Rogozhin, was not yet aware that the power she held over men was a strong and dangerous force. She had inherited it in the wild strain of her mother's blood, a weapon which could serve her or destroy her like the proverbial two-edged blade. All she knew was that men followed her with their eyes, and she liked it, because she was far too coquettish not to find it flattering, and besides, it is very amusing to be admired. But best of all, Marina knew that it roused the anger and the hatred of the prim society matrons who had been so vengefully cruel to her after her parents' death, setting the bulwark of their prejudices against her at a time when a kind word and a compassionate gesture were what she hungered for the most. Nor would she ever forgive them their consistent malevolence toward her mother. As Viktor's wife, she would have the power and the position to make them suffer. At the root of her passionate, willful nature lurked an ancient desire for revenge: all that mattered to her now was that through this marriage, she would be able to wreak her revenge as she saw fit. Beyond that, she did not think what her life with Count Rogozhin would be.

Keja stepped back, brush in hand, to examine her work. She had managed to coax Marina's curls into a chignon at the base of her neck, but a torrent of dark tendrils still escaped through the

jeweled hairpins. The tiny curls floated in a misty cloud around Marina's face. The effect was quite charming, and Keja felt justifiable satisfaction with her work. The sophisticated coiffure emphasized the long, silky slenderness of Marina's neck, the delicate curve of her bare shoulders, and the sweep of her full breasts as they curved into the deep décolleté of her gown. It gave her a sweet innocence that set off her ripe mouth and the mischievous sensuality of her eyes.

Keja nodded to Marina's reflection in the glass, and Marina rose, patting the folds of her gown into place. She stepped carefully into the satin pumps that matched her dress. She touched the pulse points at the base of her neck, behind her ears, and at her wrists with perfume. The fragrant oil gave her skin a musky, provocative scent, reminiscent of wildflowers. After a second of hesitation she tipped the crystal bottle onto her fingers and rubbed a few drops in the point of her décolletage, between her breasts, where the warmth of her skin brought the fragrance to full life. It seemed to breathe from her flesh, and she was wrapped in an invisible cloud of perfume.

The gown was cut longer in the back than in the front, forming a short train, and Marina kicked impatiently at the hem with her slipper. She studied her reflection one last time. Her arms were bare, and instead of gloves, she slipped a jeweled bangle over her elbow. It had been her mother's, and it matched the tiny diamond drops fastened to her ears.

"There," she said, giving her hair a tentative pat. "I am ready to face the dragons." She smiled with real delight. The gown was exquisite. It emphasized her delicate slimness and the striking quality of her coloring, and she was pleased.

"What of the count's necklace?" Keja reminded her. "You must wear it or he will be offended and think you don't like it."

"Ah, the necklace." Marina smiled. "I almost forgot. But no . . . wait," she cried, changing her mind with the mercurial swiftness that was so characteristic of her. She rummaged through the litter of boxes and hairpins on the vanity until she found a small leather box. She pried it open with reverent fingers. Something dangled from her fingers. "Look, Keja, this is what I will wear instead of Viktor's necklace."

Keja caught her breath when she saw the exquisite pink cameo that was carved into a delicate likeness of Marina's mother. The shell had a translucent quality, like the glow of a woman's skin.

## MARINA

It was set in an oval of perfectly matched diamonds, and under the profile, carved into the shell, was the name "Tatiana."

"This was my father's very first gift to my mother," Marina said dreamily, "and she always wore it. Everywhere she went." She held the jewel in her trembling fingers. "Find me a ribbon, Keja," she ordered. "I will wear this tonight."

Keja stood stock-still and gave a moan of horror. "No. No, Marina," she whispered, horrified. "You must not. Not the cameo. The count will be very angry."

Marina smiled prettily. "I know," she said. "Nonetheless, I will wear it."



In the polished salons of Count Viktor Rogozhin's town house, the party was getting under way, and it already had all the earmarks of a great success. The strains of the violins and the bala-laikas floated above the clamor of the chattering guests as the orchestra diligently played the lilting waltzes that were all the rage in the elegant Russian capital. The arriving guests greeted each other with little cries of delight and affection, as though they had not seen one another for a long time, although most of them had been at the Grand Duke Vladimir's ball only the night before.

"My darling Sophia, how well you look," a feminine voice trilled. "Nadja, your gown is a marvel." "Anushka, what a fine young lady you have become!" The compliments were tossed back and forth in the cultured, languorous tones widely affected by the aspiring darlings of St. Petersburg society. No one was deceived into believing that the flattering remarks that effused from the battalion of bejeweled women held the slightest hint of sincerity. They were simply a part of the hallowed, time-honored convention which demanded that social encounters of this nature begin at least with an attempt at good will. Later, when the commotion was over and the dancing had begun, one could seek out

one's friends in the general melee and whisper behind one's fan that Sophia was beginning to show her age, even under the carefully applied powder and rouge which deceived no one but herself. Dear Nadja should really know better than to dress in yellow! It accented the sallow color of her skin and gave her a hopelessly reptilian look. As for Anushka, she was a sullen and gawky girl. Small wonder that her parents despaired of finding her a husband, even a poor one. There was a good reason why her dowry was so impressively large.

Only a fool could be duped into unguarded sincerity by the compliments and pretty phrases, and only a fool—or a very brave man indeed—would bypass this frenzied exchange of counterfeit good feeling. For it comprised a part of social grace that was as much *de rigueur* in the etiquette-burdened milieu as any of the other intricate precepts which allowed, forbade, approved, and frowned upon every activity related to human life. To flaunt or disregard it would have been a very serious blunder, bringing upon the head of the culprit the wrath and censure of everyone present. So the graceful exchanges billowed from the foyer into the lavishly appointed formal rooms of Count Rogozhin's magnificent house, filling the air with sweet, trilling exclamations.

This time of gracious lies was not an idle time. It served a very real and necessary purpose. Under their happy prattle, the ladies were studying each other with the sharp scrutiny of a physician examining a specimen under a microscope. Who was well-dressed tonight, and who was not ("Really, my dear, can you imagine attiring yourself in such a fashion?"), what jewels this one or the other had chosen to wear, whether the parure of the wife of the president of the railways was lavish or just plain vulgar, were the pearls at the throat of Countess Zoliatov larger than the pearls her husband's mistress had worn to the opera last week? Did the little Baroness Von Molitnov seem much affected by her husband's open infidelities? All this vital information was garnered during the seemingly lighthearted moments that preceded the serious business of the party. That, of course, was gossip.

With the sharp instinct bred into her since girlhood, every woman collected her own set of observations to exchange in whispers during the course of the evening with her friends, or tomorrow over cozy cups of tea by hospitable samovars. The remarks would be traded like rare jewels, examined closely, dis-

cussed, studied from every side, rejected as not interesting enough or too improbable, or pondered and saved for further deliberation. Eventually the little scraps of gossip would lead to conclusions—these came when one painstakingly pieced all the little bits of information together—and these conclusions in turn would be studied until they died a natural death of unsubstantiated suppositions or blossomed forth as full-blown facts. This was when the ladies could dig their teeth into serious, engrossing talk. Hours without end, approving, disapproving. The power of these bejeweled dames was such that they could and did (by insinuation of course, since anything other would have been in bad taste) color the landscape of their husbands' opinions. In this manner they affected the lives of a great many people, some of whom had never heard of the lavish parties that were the lifeblood of St. Petersburg society.

They wielded very sharp rapiers indeed, and tonight their swordsmanship would have an excellent target in the person of Marina Konstantinova Lebedev.

The ladies had awaited this moment in breathless anticipation, and now the excitement of their imminent introduction to Count Rogozhin's bride made them fairly dizzy with suppressed curiosity. The hearts beneath the jeweled bosoms beat faster with the happy thought that soon, at any moment, the scandalous creature would be offered for their inspection. They knew their power, these cloying, sweet creatures. Tonight that girl's fate was in their hands: they would make her one of theirs or break her, as they saw fit.

Obedying some atavistic instinct for self-preservation, the gentlemen fled and left the ladies to their own devices. Later they would pick their dance partners from the bouquet of chatting women, but for the moment they sought each other's calm, peaceful company. Besides, as inexhaustibly intriguing as their wives and daughters might find the subject of Viktor's bride, the men had heard enough about the girl during the preceding weeks to welcome a change of subject. It was not that they were indifferent or bored by this mysterious Marina Lebedev. On the contrary, they were just as fascinated by her and just as curious as their wives to see for themselves the woman to whom Count Rogozhin was pledging his husbandly devotion, but it is not in the masculine temperament to excite oneself to any remarkable degree over another man's choice of a wife, unless, of course, one

desires the woman in question for oneself. And although Marina Lebedev promised to be a very exciting creature, they had little memory of the child she had been and none of the woman she had become, since, thanks to their wives, she had not been admitted into the salons of these worthy people. Still, there were many among the men who had admired Tatiana and envied Konstantin Lebedev the love she bore him. Perhaps the daughter might turn out to be as beautiful as the mother. But after all, they would see soon enough. Besides, there were other important matters to discuss.

They talked about the war. They talked about the assassination of the Austrian archduke and the archduchess, and the unrest in the Balkans. They talked about the swift, almost predatory seizure of Serbia by the Austrians in retaliation for the demise of its imperial couple. They talked about the Russian mobilization and the kaiser's furious, unequivocal ultimatum—ordering the czar to countermand his own orders and begin the immediate demobilization of the Russian armies, or the kaiser would consider the present mobilization an open act of war. The Russian soldiers were to be called back from the western front at once. The gentlemen in Viktor's salons wondered whether in the few hours that still remained before the ultimatum expired and the kaiser threatened to take action, the czar would accede to the demands of his cousin, disband his troops, and send his soldiers back to their farms and their factories. Or would he remain firm and stand his ground in the face of threats? Would he give in to the mustachioed German emperor?

The men laughed and waved the matter aside with uneasy bravado. The German was famous for his short temper and his loud threats—it was impossible to imagine that he would actually go so far as to hurl his paltry troops at the throat of the great Russian Bear. He was a braggart, a self-important buffoon. A gnat in the ear of Russia. Surely when he came to his senses, he would see the folly of waging war against a nation that had brought far greater men than he to their knees. Look at what mincemeat Russia had made of Napoleon, the great invincible general. Why, the Russians had crushed the man who had taken Europe by storm. How could the kaiser delude himself or his advisers that they would fare any better?

They discussed czar Nicholas, their trusted and dignified leader, upon whose frail shoulders lay the crushing burden of the

decision. They tried to guess the thoughts that must be racing through his mind, even now, as he deliberated his reply to Wilhelm II. And they talked on about the German emperor.

"It is absurd," an aged general with the face of a superannuated cupid exclaimed. "To allow oneself to be frightened by that vulgar clown. Let us hope the Little Father will not be frightened by his threats." He sipped his champagne delicately, soothing his hoarse throat before launching into his favorite speech. It concerned the greatness of the Russian military, and needless to add, his own role in it. His listeners were for the most part already familiar with the general theme of his speech, for they had heard it before, at other parties and over countless dinners. But they listened attentively nonetheless. The general was a senior officer who by that fact alone commanded their respect. Besides, tonight the very familiarity of his discourse offered just the sort of reassurance that is the most comforting during the time of national crisis.

The general launched into the opening chapters of his dissertation, which skillfully combined a paean to the Russian armies and a review of Russian military history with his own memoirs. The men around him nodded sagely, like attentive and well-behaved schoolboys, as the platitudes filled the air.

"The kaiser and all his generals are afraid of us," the general announced in the stentorian manner of a professor repeating yet again a tediously obvious fact. He waved his crystal champagne glass in the air as though demonstrating the principles of geometry to a group of dull children.

"And why are they afraid of us?" he asked rhetorically. "Because they know who we are. Yes," he proclaimed. "All they have to do is to look back at our victories during the war with Turkey. Now, that," he said with heavy emphasis, "was a war." He sighed melodramatically as he allowed himself to be overcome by the memory of that great historic event. Was the sigh one of gratitude that those days, his days of active duty, were far behind him, or was the sigh rather one of nostalgia for the happy days spent doing battle on the Turkish terrain? This had never been clear, but the men around the general would not have thought to ask. They knew they were not expected to interrupt. It would not have been polite. And they were far too intent on the text of the recitation to question the delivery. They longed to



hear about Russian victories in the past. It was the most potent medicine they knew against the troubles of the present.

"That was a war," the general repeated sentimentally. The champagne in his raised hand twinkled, points of topaz sparkling in the light. "And what were they doing in those days, the mighty, fearsome troops of the kaiser?" he asked derisively. "Parading through France, pretending to have achieved a victory. I saw them myself. I was a young officer then, a captain. I was chosen with two others to accompany the Russian ambassador to Paris at the height of the Franco-Prussian debacle. I saw with my very own eyes, gentlemen, these so-called mighty, valiant troops—and a poor lot they were. Like scarecrows in their tattered uniforms, dragging themselves through the pleasant French countryside with their tails tucked between their legs, like whipped dogs. Victors! I ask you!" he scoffed. "While my own men, who were fighting, not a passel of French peasants and a few convents full of nuns, but the savage Turks, were strong, manly, endowed with the greatest weapon ever known to any army. And what is that, you ask? And you may well ask. That, my friends, is something called patriotism. Yes! Pride in one's country, in oneself, a belief in one's officers. Only this can withstand the bite of the bullet and the cut of steel. And there is no pride, no spirit, no soul, like the Russian soul."

A pause followed, which under normal circumstances would have dictated a round of polite applause and perhaps a patriotic toast, but tonight the general's audience was too intent on assuaging its own fears to break the thread of the recitation.

The general took advantage of the pause to refresh himself with a glass of champagne. He took a glass from a passing tray, emptied it quickly, and helped himself to another. The other gentlemen followed suit. It would be a long evening.

"I was only a young soldier at the time—after all, that was in the 1870s," the general continued when the servant bearing the tray of glasses had passed. "I was fresh from the barracks, it was my first command. But even to a young, inexperienced soldier like myself, it was clear the strength of the great German army does not lie in the spirit of its soldiers. I said to myself, Anton, if these men were ever to confront the Russian army on the battlefield, they would take one look and run for their lives. I tell you, gentlemen, they would turn pale, they would faint like women before the magnificence of our fighting men." The old

warrior's rheumy eyes glazed with emotion and champagne. "What I saw in France showed me what a fine army we have here. It gave me the courage to lead my men into some of the fiercest battles in history. What fighters the Turks were in those days—it made your blood run cold to see them rise over a hill, come at you, charging toward you, hordes of riders flashing sabers and firing pistols. Yes, war was war then, my friends. And it was during this time that I was promoted to the rank of lieutenant in the Horse Guards—a promotion granted for . . . ahem, exceptional valor in battle—and I became aide-de-camp to the great General Chernaiev himself."

The recital degenerated into an account of the general's triumphs, personal as well as military, with a digression now and then to fill in the background events of Russian military history. The story now centered by and large on the narrator, and although its autobiographical nature did not of itself strictly reinforce the original thesis of Russian military glory, it rang so much of confidence and pride that the men felt their own optimism strengthen and grow as the general droned on. They listened quite contentedly to the old man, for in their hearts they agreed with his patriotic vanity and felt, as he did, that for the kaiser or any other foreign power to challenge Russia was to beg for annihilation. Russia, with her beloved czar and her invincible army. How strong she was, how beautiful! And if the ignominious defeat of this glorious Russia at the hands of the Japanese not quite ten years before did not shake their faith, it must be noted that if the Japanese had fought on land, like honorable soldiers, instead of on the sea, Russia would have routed them at the first encounter.

The army! Six million men bearing arms for imperial Russia! If the general was not modern enough to use the phrase "Russian Steamroller," it was not for this that the popular idiom did not resound in the minds of all the men around him. But oblivious as he was of any mode of speech that had come into fashion after his own youth, the general talked well, and the men listened attentively.

Other groups had formed throughout the large salon which would be used for dancing later.

A cluster of dour middle-aged men, alike in the uniform of their somber, well-cut evening clothes, discreetly elegant mustaches, and well-groomed beards, was deeply involved in a

serious conversation. The natural flamboyance of the military men was absent: in its place, the calm self-possession of successful businessmen. Indeed, with two exceptions, the gentlemen were all financiers, men involved in the real matters of the world; men who knew that economic strategy is often a good deal more important to the success or failure of a war than all the well-cut uniforms God himself could devise. Those two men who did not by rights belong to this gloomy, well-informed clique were Dimitri Alenkov, who enjoyed the lofty post of minister of education, and Petrov Ubensaki, attaché to the Russian embassy in Warsaw, here in St. Petersburg on a holiday.

"Surely, surely, they cannot be serious," Baron Basil Markiev was saying. "After all, we are not a little underdeveloped nation struggling out of our medieval history toward the first dawn of industrialism. The Germans must be aware that we are very nearly self-sufficient. If they were to force us into a war, we would be almost impregnable. Why, Russia could provide for itself even under the most dire of circumstances. Are we not even now in a position to supply our troops food, materials, and iron for the next five years?"

"I agree, I am emphatically of your opinion" said Nicholai Kiranski, president of the Imperial Bank and financial adviser to the czar himself. He was a lean string of a man who could have been called scrawny had he not been so tall. But nature, in her perverse way, had seen fit to give him a long body and a bony, pointed head, which had caused his enemies to remark that he resembled a bullet. He had the demeanor and the general aspect of a mathematician, and a gift for retaining statistics and numerical figures. And a passion for parading them.

"Let me see . . ." He tapped his emaciated cheeks with an equally emaciated finger. His small eyes narrowed until they were tiny slits in his face. "Only last year, the national exports exceeded five hundred thousand tons in food alone. That is, sugar, alcohol, flour, and tobacco," he enumerated pedantically. "And in the industrial sector, we manufactured more than forty million tons of pig iron, giving us a very high status in the international market. A very high status indeed," he repeated, not for emphasis, for he was innocent of any theatrical flair, but because this repetition always helped him think. It was a habit that his wife found extremely annoying, but even her constant shrew-

ish complaints had not broken him of it. He would apologize timidly and then forget.

"If I remember correctly, the coal we have drawn from the Donets Basin was nearly sufficient to provide half the country with fuel. Then, we have the mines, and the oil."

"Yes, the oil," Alenkov broke in eagerly, determined not to be taken for a fool or an innocent by these princes of the financial world. "We are, are we not, responsible for almost twenty percent of the oil production in the world? I mean to say," he stammered uncomfortably, suddenly afraid that he had made a faux pas, "I mean to say, we do supply one-fifth of the total global oil, do we not?" he finished desperately.

Kiranski favored him with a kindly, distant look. "Yes, that is correct. One-fifth on a global scale." Alenkov smiled his gratitude and his relief and resolved that henceforth he would keep his opinions to himself.

Thus, with Kiranski presiding, the conversation continued apace on the subject of the great natural wealth of Russia, and then perforce, as these men were after all not geographers, but financiers, the talk reverted to the monetary situation of the country. Sound, they agreed, feeling somehow that this piece of good news was due directly to themselves. In matters of finance, the Russian health had never been better. In the last ten years, ever since the French banks had undertaken to float the Russian currency, the security of the economy was assured.

They were, it must be said, in favor of the war. They hoped more than they believed that the kaiser would make good his threat. A war might be deplorable on the battlefield and in the barracks, but in economic terms, it could be a godsend. Good for the nation because it stimulates the economy, and good for shrewd financiers like themselves who had the capital and foresight to invest in the right concerns. A munitions factory, for example, or a factory supplying uniforms and greatcoats for the army.

Alenkov listened to the wise, soft talk of these sleek men, and as soon as he dared, he excused himself from the group and went off in search of more congenial company. He could see the ladies standing in the foyer, lounging on the sofas in the salon, and he longed for the dancing to begin. It is time for the party to start, he thought. Enough of this talk. He was beginning to feel irritated. He wished ardently that he had not volunteered his paltry

bit of information. Those men must think me an imbecile, he mourned inwardly.

Alenkov felt a hand on his arm and heard someone say his name. It was his host, Viktor Rogozhin. The count had been circulating among his guests, welcoming them to his house. Now he smiled at Dimitri Alenkov, and the minister of education felt the warmth of that smile wash over him and ease the sting of his wounded self-esteem. But Alenkov was a perceptive man, who owed much of his professional success to his knack for noticing details that often escaped less shrewd observers. Something is wrong, Alenkov thought as he returned Rogozhin's welcoming handshake. Suddenly he saw that the count's smile was not really a smile at all, but more of a grimace. The man's eyes are cold, Alenkov said to himself. They are hard, like a snake's. There is no warmth to him. This is the face of a predator, not the face of a man in love.

Alenkov gave himself a mental shake. This was not the time to indulge in psychological tours de force. Count Rogozhin fascinated him. A very interesting man, this one. Handsome, in a severe, distinguished sort of way, and quite charming. Yet, not appealing; no, almost frightening.

Count Viktor Rogozhin was a big man, tending naturally toward corpulence. He kept himself from crossing the line between elegant plumpness and unbecoming obesity. He had a thatch of sandy-colored hair which might have been unruly had it not been kept cropped short and close to his head. His features were large, the forehead wide, the cheekbones broad, the nose a shade away from being coarse. His mouth was very red, the lips slightly pendulous, and the lower circumference of his face was jowly. Count Rogozhin's skin was very fair, and spotted with a multitude of tiny freckles. His eyes were hard, opaque blue marbles that seemed disproportionately small in his big face.

He has the mask of a gross sensualist, Alenkov reflected. Yet here is a man who is famous for his beautiful mistresses. Here is a man known far and wide for his intelligence—is not his fortune due as much to his financial wizardry as to his inheritance? He is shrewd at buying land and investing in foreign markets. Yet there is something unfulfilled about the fellow. Tonight appears to be suffering the tortures of the damned under that elegant detached manner of his. I wonder what his bride is like? Alenkov asked himself with a flash of real curiosity.

But internal conjectures would have to wait. "I am so glad that you and Madame Alenkov were able to join us this evening," Rogozhin was saying.

"My dear Count, let me assure you that we were delighted to have the honor of congratulating you on your happiness," Alenkov replied with courtly politeness.

Viktor Rogozhin smiled, and for an instant Alenkov thought he saw the hard eyes soften. It seemed the count was about to say something, to make a personal, human remark, perhaps, as befitted the occasion, Alenkov thought. After all the man is getting married tomorrow. One would think he would show some sign of happiness. But Viktor Rogozhin only bowed, leaving Alenkov with his thanks and the hope that he would enjoy the party. Then he moved on to welcome new guests.

The crowd in the main ballroom had grown now. The deep hum of masculine voices made a soothing counterpoint to the lighter chatter of the women. Alenkov noticed that the guests from the German embassy had formed a small, tight contingent, which huddled, as if for protection, around the tall, soldierly figure of Von Eggeling, the ambassador. Was it a sense of propriety that kept them from mixing with the other guests? Or was it a sudden patriotic fervor which warned against fraternization with the possible enemy?

Von Eggeling smiled at some mild joke told by his aide, and Alenkov saw the diplomat's look of studied unconcern. Viktor Rogozhin approached the enclave of German dignitaries. Alenkov watched with admiration the skill with which the count flattered and cajoled the kaiser's men into a more gracious frame of mind. Soon Von Eggeling was deep in conversation with Rogozhin, and the count led the stately Teuton away from his henchmen and introduced him to a party of Russian officers, where he was welcomed with warm handshakes. After all, this was a social occasion, and hardly a time to reflect on what would or would not transpire on the battlefield.

Bereft of their leader, the lesser German dignitaries dispersed through the room in groups of two and three, and after a time they attached themselves to other circles of guests and were presently involved in new debates.

It was getting late. The ladies were becoming restless. They tapped their slippered feet to the strains of the orchestra and looked longingly toward the room where the men had fled.

Would the dancing ever start? they wondered. Where was this girl Marina Lebedev? When was she going to come downstairs so the party could begin in earnest? they fumed.

A dour old woman stood in the doorway near the ballroom. She was dressed in black from head to toe, and a fortune in diamonds was draped about her person. The sparkling gems wound in ropes around her fleshy throat and hung like misplaced stars from her thick wrists and fingers. She clicked her fan against her teeth impatiently, plump forehead wrinkled, perulantly thin lips pursed into a coquettish and ludicrous pout. Without her expensive gown and gorgeous jewels she might easily have been mistaken for a cook or a maid in some bourgeois household. In fact she was neither of these. She was the Baroness Malinkova, widow of the famous General Malinkov, a countess in her own right, and the dowager queen of St. Petersburg society by popular consent.

Baroness Malinkova had attended all the important social events since the accession of Czar Nicholas in 1894. For twenty years the fetes and galas in the capital had been conducted under her vigilant eye; she presided at weddings, at christenings, and at funerals, making certain that the dear departed was mourned in accordance with the strictest rules of etiquette, lest his entrance into the heavenly kingdom reflect badly upon this kingdom on earth. She was a trusted friend of the czarina, and consequently invited to all the court functions. She dined frequently with the imperial family.

The baroness could not, under the best of circumstances, be called a pleasant woman. In her youth, she held a brief, tenuous claim to beauty which saw her through her first season into the first year of her marriage. But her beauty had left her long before the death of her husband, and she had begun to acquire the stately, oppressive manner that characterized her widowhood, as if preparing for it all along. She was massive rather than fat, in the way that the daughters and wives of military men often are, as if, by some mysterious process of osmosis, they finally absorb the carriage and the countenance of their portly fathers and spouses. Her features, never delicate even in the first flush of youth, had thickened with age. Her broad nose was threaded with a network of tiny veins. The skin around her sharp, penetrating eyes was coarse and deeply wrinkled, and the flesh at her throat was crepy. Three black hairs sprouted belligerently from the mole on her cheek.

For all her etiquette, the baroness's manner was not much more appealing than her physique. The curses she threw at the servants would have done credit to a barracks sergeant, and she was not above administering cuffs and blows to her unhappy domestics. With men of her own class she was flirtatious. She teased and scolded them playfully. Women she treated with open condescension, unbending only when she was in the very best of spirits and in the company of ladies whom she judged to be as nearly her peers as could be expected. Then she used them as confidantes, admiring audiences for her witty, biting comments.

Tonight she was in an excellent humor. It was an important night, a very important night indeed. She had been looking forward to this occasion with delight, and she relished every moment of it.

The old woman remembered the dancer Tatiana very vividly, and with good cause. It was she, the baroness, who first ordered the young prima ballerina out of her house on the grounds that the dancer was conducting herself immorally with her escort, the young Count Konstantin Lebedev. It was not that it was unusual for gentlemen to take mistresses, but Count Lebedev's wife was the baroness's niece, a distinction which clearly set her far above the sphere of ordinary human consideration. That the Countess Lebedev, Konstantin's wife, was also an extraordinarily unpleasant, difficult, and demanding woman did not excuse her husband in the slightest. Nor did it matter that the countess was incapable of love, kindness, affection, and colored her husband's life with every misery she could devise. It was easy to understand why the exquisite, generous Tatiana was the love of the young count's life, the passion of his manhood, for whom he would gladly have sacrificed the privileges to which he was entitled by birth. Blind eyes could clearly see why he had left his shrewish countess for the passionate Tatiana. Blind eyes—but not the eyes of Baroness Malinkova. "My niece shall not be shamed by this gutter upstart," she declared, and barred Tatiana from her house. Count Lebedev led Tatiana away, weeping, clinging to him in angry humiliation. He swore he would never darken the baroness's venerable doorstep again. But the old woman remained implacable. And because she set the tone for St. Petersburg society, Tatiana was barred from her lover's world.

Konstantin Lebedev was a man of strong character, and he stuck fast to his promise to shun the people who ostracized the



woman he loved, although they made it clear he was welcome among them, provided he was alone. He declined their conditional invitations curtly and made his world with Tatiana. Their revenge was their happiness, which depended neither upon the imprimatur of the legal establishment nor upon the approval of St. Petersburg society. They lived together quietly. She abandoned the ballet, which had been all her life, for his sake. He turned his back upon his past, his wife, the honors that were his due as a nobleman. From the passion of their love came the girl Marina, named after Tatiana's mother. The old baroness fumed at the news of Konstantin's new child. She swore that the girl could not succeed where the mother had failed. Had she barred Tatiana to suffer her daughter? No, not ever, and tonight Anuskya Malinkova had come to Count Rogozhin's house to discredit the girl, to prevent the marriage if she could, and at the least to see to it that Viktor Rogozhin spent every hour of his life ruing the day he took Marina Lebedev for his wife.

The old baroness twiddled her fan between her thick fingers, playing idly with the spray of ostrich feathers. It was getting late, and the girl had not yet appeared. She looked hopefully toward the polished marble staircase. Was it possible that the chit had come to her senses at this late hour and realized for herself the unsuitability of this match? Had she peeked over the banisters at the crowd below and finally understood that she, a Gypsy's bastard child, had no place amid the throng of noble and high-born people gathered here? Had she changed her mind? At the last, had she rejected Count Rogozhin's mad scheme to bring her into society? Or, the baroness wondered grimly, was the creature deliberately making them wait? Insolent from the start.

Marina's tardiness was intolerably rude, her refusal to come down and greet her guests at a proper hour a disgrace, and she, Baroness Anuskya Malinkova, had had enough of waiting. The old woman scanned the crowd for Count Rogozhin. She spotted him deep in conversation with an Austrian dignitary.

"Look at them standing there, with their medals flashing and their noses in the air. Why, their chests are puffed out like peacocks!" she remarked acidly to her companion. "Look at the Austrian," she snorted. "I wonder his chin doesn't catch in the chandelier. From the way he holds himself, one would think that he and his platoon of little bureaucrats are here for the express purpose of accepting our surrender. As though we would be

cowed by their tawdry little ultimatums." Her companion snickered conspiratorially. She was a pale little mouse of a woman, also widowed and highborn, but less self-possessed than the baroness, and a little intimidated by her magnificent friend.

The pale woman twittered nervously, "Yes, but they are quite handsome, don't you think? Especially the ones in uniforms."

The remark, though true, was unfortunately unpatriotic. In less delicate circumstances, the baroness would have pointed this out in no uncertain terms, probably reducing her timid little companion to tears.

But tonight the dowager had more pressing matters on her mind. She magnanimously let it pass.

"That fool Rogozhin!" the baroness hissed through her teeth. "Making a donkey of himself over some slut of a girl. A gutter-snipe I would not allow to work in my kitchens." She clicked her tongue in exasperation. "It is really incomprehensible. Viktor Rogozhin—the shrewdest entrepreneur in the city, an aristocrat from an impeccable family! Why, he could have wed the czar's daughter if he had wished. He will regret it," she finished darkly. But already she was beginning to enjoy the imminent troubles and downfall of Count Rogozhin. Well, he had brought it upon himself, more the fool he. The baroness looked ahead to the pleasure she would take in predicting the sorry outcome from the beginning.

"Aren't they a little young? The daughters of the czar, I mean," her gentle companion ventured timidly.

The baroness shot her an irritable glance. Stony eyes flashing, the mole on her chin bristling, she could hardly restrain her longing to box the other lady's shell-like ears.

"Really, Olga Baslinova, you are a dimwit," she exclaimed. "I myself was barely sixteen when I married. We do not all have to wait until we are twenty to find ourselves a husband," she said with pointed emphasis. Olga Baslinova blushed hotly at the memory of her close brush with spinsterhood. But the gentle lady was as capable of viciousness as her friend. "Count Rogozhin's family impeccable . . . well . . . I don't know . . ." she quavered.

The baroness's face relaxed into an ingratiating grimace as some of the younger women came to curtsy to her. She simpered benignly as they inquired politely about her health. Clucking affably, with the corners of her mouth tucked up into a smile, her

eyes nearly obscured by heavy lids, she, society's queen, resembled nothing so much as a dozing bird of prey. In truth, her mind was not on the bevy of girls, but on the Rogozhin clan. When the girls were gone, she returned to the subject at hand.

"Do you mean the young Rogozhin scamp?" she asked, feigning shock. "What a memory you have for scandal, darling Olga. That was five years ago. You should be ashamed of yourself."

The blood rushed to Olga's face, making her turn quite red. She stared miserably at the floor, smarting under the reprimand. She did not know what to reply and feared the tongue-lashing that would follow. But tonight she fretted in vain, for the baroness had already forgotten the exchange and was busying herself with something else.

"You," she said, hailing a passing servant as one might hail a carriage, "go and tell your master I want a word with him, and be quick about it." She turned back to Olga. "Time someone took this affair in hand," she said. "If dear Viktor won't, I will."

The young women ostensibly caught up in their gay conversations were really beginning to feel impatient. They smoothed their billowing skirts of silk and organdy and they cast demure and longing glances in the ballroom where the men were engrossed in talk. Would this Marina Lebedev ever come down from her room, so the fun of the party could begin? So they could dance. It was time for the talking to stop. It was time and gone to be out on the dance floor, in the arms of those dashing officers.

What handsome figures in their splendid uniforms. Suddenly boys they had always known were no longer ordinary and tiresome. They appeared now in a new light—serious, older, more mature in their uniforms. The old charm of the military costume worked its magic, causing a rash of heart flutters and a new, surprising shyness. There was Anatoly Pyriatkin—suddenly so handsome in the blue uniform of a War Ministry aide. Beside him, a young man with a heavenly mustache, as dashing as the villain in a melodrama. He wore a green uniform, the battle dress of the infantry. The patch on his shoulder, which the ladies strained their eyes to read, showed that he was a lieutenant in the Fifteenth Corps. And look at the one over there in red—he had the carriage of a dancer. There was something devilish and appealing about him. Not quite so handsome as some of the others, but magnetically attractive just the same.

It did not matter to the ladies that none of the three young

men would ever get any closer to the fighting than they stood now. It did not make the slightest difference to anyone that these elegant men would never dirty their hands at the front. And so much the better. How much nicer to have them here, to dance with in St. Petersburg. Just to look into their dark eyes and sigh happily while the fire of love raged in one's heart.

Oh, the girls moaned inwardly, beginning to hate Marina for keeping them waiting so long, would the men never come to claim them, never sweep them into the lulling, inviting vortex of the dance?

"Isn't this strange?" one beribboned miss whispered to another, glancing at the marble staircase from whence Viktor's bride would descend. "I wonder what is keeping her."

Her friend, who affected great sophistication in these matters, refused to show her own excitement and impatience. "She will be here soon, Maya, soon. She is probably afraid to show her face. But I'm sure dear Count Rogozhin will fetch her before long. Do stop fiddling with your skirt and wiggling like that. You are behaving like a child," she added sharply.

But beribboned Maya was not the only one to wonder what had become of Marina Lebedev. Enconced on a silk settee, the Baroness Malinkova was airing her displeasure.

"And when, if it is not indiscreet, my dear Count, are we to see your fiancée? Has she fallen ill? Perhaps expired in the excitement? Do you think you should send someone up to her rooms to remind her that she has guests to attend to? If the poor child is still alive, that is."

"I thank you for your concern, my dear Baroness," Viktor Rogozhin replied with a small bow. "Mademoiselle Lebedev has, in fact, not been feeling completely well. A slight indisposition, you understand. But nothing serious. I assure you that she will join us shortly."

Both he and the baroness knew that this was a barefaced lie, of course, but they tacitly agreed to accept it as the truth. Or at least to let it pass for the moment. She is already making a fool of you, my dear man, the baroness thought exultantly. As for Viktor, he had already sent a servant up to Marina's room twice to remind her that the guests were becoming impatient and to beg her to hurry. But she would not be rushed. First, it seemed that she still had to complete her coiffure, and half an hour later

she had felt faint and begged a few minutes to rest before coming down.

Under his calm facade Viktor Rogozhin was very angry. Nothing could have provoked him more than Marina's flat refusal to obey his orders. Only his mandatory presence among the guests here kept him from bringing her down himself—by force if necessary. But he could hardly leave without every gossip-monger and tight-lipped shrew commenting that his fiancée was already too difficult for him to manage. The pose of disaffection and unconcern which he affected so well was designed to keep their suspicions at bay, to still their slander-hungry tongues before the rumors began to spread. He was well aware of the stir caused by his marriage. He knew that everyone here was watching him with vigilant malice, waiting for the slightest sign of disharmony between him and his fiancée. Viktor's eyes darkened with angry resolution. He would teach the girl to respect his wishes. He would make it clear that disobedience was not to her advantage. She would not flout him again.

"Perhaps, if your Grace were to sanction it, the dancing might begin now," he suggested to the baroness by way of compromise. "I am sure that no one would object if you were to suggest it."

The subtlety of this flattery delighted the belligerent old woman and pacified her. To breach etiquette and allow the couples to move onto the dance floor before the hostess arrived if she, the baroness, permitted it was a compliment of the highest order. It affirmed that her judgment and good wishes were above even the strictest social codes. Baroness Malinkova fairly beamed with pleasure. Her beady eyes came as close as they could come to sparkling. But she was not simple enough to be taken in by Viktor's ploy.

"No, no, no," she protested affably. "I would not hear of it. I am sure that your little bride will be with us soon, and it would be too cruel to start the party before she joined us." Why should we cover up for the little chit's lack of breeding? she thought maliciously. Much better indeed for everyone to see what sort of woman she is, right from the start.

Rogozhin bowed courteously. "As you wish, Baroness. Now, if you will excuse me, I must attend to my guests." He crossed under the wide arched doors of the salon into the foyer, headed upstairs to fetch his stubborn bride. But someone shouted his name in a hearty, mocking voice. Viktor stopped dead in his tracks,

frozen stock-still. Then he turned and faced the man whom he had wished dead, buried, and forgotten every day for the past five years. Viktor tried to control the dislike that welled up in him. His features twisted into a smile as bright and as dangerous as a sword. He crossed the great marbled hall. "My dear Sergei," he said. "Welcome!"



A collector of fine art in the form of bronzes, exotic statuettes, and fine canvases, Viktor Rogozhin was a work of art in himself. His was a body which nature had designed for heavy labor, for springtime plowing and hefting of timber and firewood during the rugged winter months. It was properly the body of a sturdy peasant, which by some celestial clerical error had been allotted to the son of a long line of rich and consequently idle people.

The thick shoulders, the broad chest, and the wide, strong hands which would have stood the moujik or the factory worker in good stead were buried under a layer of whitish flesh almost feminine in its softness. Where the proud line of a muscle might have delighted the eye with its uncompromising virile vigor, there hung instead gentle mounds of dormant, unused sinews, now softened into fat. His belly was pendulous, his thighs flaccid, his lagging posterior as smooth as a woman's cheek. But part of the artistry of Count Rogozhin lay in knowing how to pull from this unappealing, incongruous carcass the very self of dignity, the illusion of a figure of power, wealth, and success.

To that end he employed the finest tailors in St. Petersburg and in Europe, carefully directing the line and cut of his

clothes—the vest more than a little tight, to hold in the failing muscles of his paunch, the trousers cut to disguise the corpulence of his thighs, his shirts and jackets made to divert the eye from the buttery sag of his chest and shoulders. Nothing was left to chance. Every stitch that covered his massive frame was carefully chosen to contribute to his public presentation of himself. As a result, the inelegant squab form which emerged gleaming pink and wet from the bath to be patted dry by the waiting manservant was transformed, as if by magic, but in fact by art, into the dignified and prepossessing figure of Viktor Rogozhin. Even his mistresses rarely saw him as he truly was, for in matters of love he shrewdly chose to satisfy his lust only in the kindly, opaque glow of penumbral light.

As a lover, he was more demanding than most men, having long ago dismissed the ordinary forms of carnal satisfaction as expedient but rather dull for his jaded palate. He preferred the thrill of diversity, and availed himself without compunction of the considerable variations which his purse afforded him and which men of his class described as "piquant." Not given by nature to the rigorous exertion of physical activity, he found a certain enjoyment in observing the delegated activities of paid companions, and in the elegant brothels which he frequented, he had a reputation for an exotic, even flamboyant turn of mind. But he was a lavish patron who paid generously and tipped his bedmates without stinting, and they rarely complained. In brief, his sexual attitudes were not incongruous with the taste of the well-provided gentlemen of the Edwardian era, the men who by their wealth alone had the right to exercise every corporeal whim—to keep mistresses, to hire whores and use them as they saw fit, to buy the maidenheads of virgin girl-children the better to stoke their flagging potency, all this in a society which on the surface was more deeply wed to a rigid code of propriety than any in Europe. While the czar's wife ordered the legs of the tables in her apartments covered for fear of immodesty, the men who dined in her august presence were as rampantly incontinent as the most famously licentious Roman emperors. Viktor Rogozhin and the men of his class were the products of a society where nothing pertaining to the seamier side of sexual love was openly admitted, but every adventure was tacitly allowed, even admired. They were the men who made the phenomenon of the Belle Epoque possible, the men who financed the merry and unin-



hibited careers of famous courtesans like La Belle Otéro, who openly claimed five kings and an American millionaire as her lovers.

In the bedroom, as on the floor of the Exchange, the Bourse in Paris, or the staidly decorated offices of St. Petersburg, these men liked to dominate, physically and by command. They considered the buying and selling of female flesh a logical extension of their capitalistic privileges, all the while sentimentally declaring themselves bound by love to their dignified and unyielding spouses.

But Viktor differed from his confreres in that sexual dalliance was to him an idle sport, a recreation that he allowed himself from the more vital passion of his life. For he was a hard, imperturbable man who by nature was not disposed to suffer the emotional torments of less directed mortals. He had given his heart, his energy, and his life to one mistress, and her name was power. Born already wealthy, he desired more wealth. Born with position and privilege, he built a kingdom where he reigned as the supreme law. He was absolute master and sovereign in his houses and on his many estates. He was both liege and monarch in his business establishment. He ruled over his dominions with deliberate, absolute autocracy, brooking neither rebellion nor the suggestion of it. To him, the antichrist was embodied by the revolutionary, and instinctively he hated and feared him.

Under this stern governorship, Viktor Rogozhin prospered but was unsatisfied. He continued to lust insatiably after power, influence, and prestige. Power was at once his aphrodisiac and the object of his passion.

Love as it was known by lesser mortals crossed his life's path once, a flaming meteor that illuminated the cold lunar landscape of his heart. In one blinding flash he truly understood desire and the furor of the blood of which poets sang. And as is often the case with stern, self-possessed men, he had burned all the passion of his shriveled heart in one ecstatic, writhing flame, and poured all the emotion of his frugal nature on the altar of one goddess.

He had loved the dancer Tatiana. For her he had felt the tremor of his desire rip through his marble veins, heard the palpitation of his own senses, and borne the insufferable torment of his own blood. He had become the slave of his need for her, to see her, watch her walk down the elegant avenues, see the sun on her hair, hear the rustle of her silky skirts, listen to her deep laughter, and watch the lights change in her amber eyes. She was

his life, his obsession, his narcotic. He forgot everything—who he was, what she was. He forgot that he was a count and she was a Gypsy's brat. He was willing to forfeit the power and respect he had spent his life accumulating. He was ready to throw position and good name to the wind to make her his wife. He would bear censure and scandal to hold her in his arms. He would not ask for love; he would hope, and wait. Perhaps one day his goddess would return his love. In the meantime, he humbly begged for nothing more than the permission to spoil her, to adore her, to give her his name.

But the dancer Tatiana had flashed her Gypsy eyes and chuckled languidly in her throaty, raucous way at his passionate outpourings and laughed at his declarations of love. Still he persisted with his ardent, lavish attentions, showering her with jewels and baskets of fragrant, exotic blossoms. He gave elaborate, intimate suppers for her, tête-à-têtes in secret, romantic settings, deceiving himself into believing that she would succumb. It was only a matter of time. He would convince her, he would win her. To this end he spared himself no effort, no humiliation. It was his private passion. Soon he would tell his friends. When she was his wife, they would accept Tatiana. Then he would show her off in public. But for now, he kept her to himself.

A fool in love, he had not trusted her coolness. He had not been prepared for the disappointment of her refusal. When she took Konstantin Lebedev for her lover, Rogozhin was crushed, broken. He suffered the torments of a broken heart and the agonies of unrequited love as deeply as his calculating, self-interested nature would allow. He beat his brow, he pleaded, he wept, he begged her to reconsider. Lebedev was a married man—he, Viktor, would give her his name, the title of countess, and a place in society. Feeling pity for him, Tatiana explained patiently but firmly that she loved Konstantin Lebedev. For good or ill, her life was bound to his.

In time, Viktor recovered from his emotional shock. His disappointed passion for her hardened around his heart, brittle and dead. He closed the door, finally and forever, to all human love. He slipped back into his old patterns of power and conquest. And because at last he realized that Tatiana had never taken him seriously as a lover, had thought him a figure of fun, a sweet buffoon, the love he felt for her turned to hatred, and he vowed revenge.

They met again only once, by accident, for she was barred from those circles where Viktor Rogozhin was so elegantly at home, where he was courted and admired. And he had avoided the gay bistros and restaurants where she and Lebedev met their friends. In his hatred, he could not bear to hear her name. He ceased attending the ballet on nights when she danced; he refused invitations to artistic soirees, for fear that he might meet her there.

But St. Petersburg, like all other cities, is a small and dangerous place for the spurned lover. It was fated that they would meet, and when they did, Viktor Rogozhin, for all his hatred, was unprepared. It dismayed him because he had ignored its inevitability. Ignored the element of surprise. He had secretly imagined it many times, rehearsing in the darkness the cool, contemptuous remarks he would make to the woman who had cast him aside. He pictured himself, strong in his world, pouring ridicule on Tatiana, mocking her to his friends. But their meeting, so avoided and so desired, did not take place in the lavish salon or the intimate restaurant of his invention.

Viktor saw Tatiana in public, in broad daylight, on a perfect summer afternoon, balmy and fresh. The air from the Bay of Finland wafted through the city without a hint of frost or mist. Tatiana was strolling leisurely down the Quay des Anglais, on her afternoon walk, enjoying the warm sun and the appreciative glances of the passersby who recognized her and bowed courteously in her direction. In spite of himself, Viktor's heart constricted when he saw her. She was still so beautiful, so vibrant. But the flood of warm emotion cooled quickly, and turned to hatred as he watched. She was strolling toward him. She had not seen him yet. How lovely she was in her white lace gown, her filmy parasol shielding her from the sun.

Tatiana was not alone. A little girl walked beside her—her child, and Lebedev's. The girl was small and delicate, with long, coltish legs and the same black curly hair as her mother. She was not more than five years old, but already she had a wild, untamed beauty reminiscent of the wood sprites in the sort of sentimental Edwardian painting that Viktor loathed. A face dappled with lights and shadows, and ripe with the promise of a great and sensual beauty.

He watched the pair approach; the mother elegant and sensual, the child graceful and free. They walked easily together,

chatting and laughing, the mother happily engaged with her little girl. When at last Tatiana raised her head, she looked directly into Viktor's eyes. She stopped abruptly. Her mouth tightened. She whispered something to the child, who came to her and clung tightly to her hand. A cold, hard look passed between Tatiana and Viktor. She knew how instrumental he had been in closing her out of his world, in venting his jealousy of her life with Lebedev. She stood stock-still, pale, frozen. With unctuous courtesy, Viktor bent over her gloved hand. Then he reached to stroke the child's head, but Tatiana pulled the girl behind her, out of Rogozhin's reach.

"Lovely child. She could have been mine," Rogozhin said with bitter wistfulness.

But Tatiana had suffered too much at his hands to be moved. "She is mine," she said coldly, "and nothing I have will ever belong to you."

Viktor's back stiffened with rage. His voice was very soft and very deadly. "We will see," he said.

Tatiana paled visibly under her fine film of powder. She was frightened by the veiled threat of Viktor's remark, because she knew his power. "What do you mean?" she asked with an icy self-possession she did not feel.

Viktor shrugged, vindicated by her fear. "One never knows what the fates have in store. Anything is possible." With that he bowed and left them, his heart beating wildly. For at that moment the hatred he harbored for Tatiana and Konstantin Lebedev ceased to be amorphous. It hardened and took a sudden, unexpected shape; the pain twisted in him one last time, turning his blood, ripping through his bowels, and emerging as a clear, infallible resolution. He would bide his time, he would wait, he was a patient man. The mother had eluded him, but he would have the girl. "Revenge will be mine," he muttered to himself as he strolled home along the white stone quay.

Viktor Rogozhin—harbinger of hatred, nurser of secret revenge—such was the man who with outstretched arms moved to welcome his hated and notorious cousin. For a fraction of a second the two men's eyes locked, and each saw in the other the antithesis of what he was himself, and the flesh and bone of what he hated in the world. But they were both too wordly to allow their dislike to cause an awkwardness, and before anyone could have detected the slightest hint of animosity between them, they

were locked in a firm, fraternal handshake. Not even the shrewdest observer could have guessed that the tall younger cossack captain and the portly, impeccably attired financier had only their blood and a long history of mutual dislike to bind them.

Viktor beamed, "My dear cousin, I am delighted that you could come."

"Cousin, cousin"—Sergei Rogozhin smiled with equal warmth—"I would not have missed this for the world."

"Come, cousin," Viktor said graciously, "come and meet my guests."

Thus they walked into the salon, arm in arm, and as Viktor made the introductions, he could feel the admiring eyes of the ladies follow his cousin. His irritation with the young captain increased tenfold. The two men made their way through the salon, and presently they joined a group of men who were discussing the development and use of the trans-Siberian railroad.

"A marvel of engineering," one of them was saying, "that must put us at the head of technological prowess for all time." The others nodded approvingly, but Viktor Rogozhin saw Sergei's mouth curl in a faint, derisive smile. He cringed inwardly, but having no choice, made the introduction. "May I present my cousin Captain Sergei Rogozhin." There was a round of prescribed handshakes and civilities. One of the gentlemen asked if Captain Rogozhin knew his son and his brother who served with the cossacks. Sergei explained that he was new to the regiment. Other men remembered the incident with the German ambassador's wife. Now, on the eve of war with Germany, Sergei's ruthlessness seemed almost patriotic. They were delighted to have him back in St. Petersburg. The gentlemen were affable to the point of being fatuous. Viktor felt disgusted and disappointed. As soon as the necessary formalities were completed, he excused himself, regretting now that he had yielded to a patriotic and familial sense of obligation and brought Sergei back to Russia. No need for despair, he told himself sternly, thinking, with a certain cynical humor, that here at long last was a target worthy of an anarchist's talents. And, failing that, he mused hopefully, Sergei was sure to get himself into trouble with someone's husband within a fortnight. Maybe this time the cuckold would prove a better shot.

But for the moment he had a more vexing concern. Viktor had reached the end of his patience with Marina. He was in a

white rage. Too shrewd not to know what a stir his impending marriage had caused among his friends, he could imagine the criticisms and whispers that had followed the announcement of his betrothal to Marina Lebedev. His fertile invention rendered an accurate picture of his guests quizzing each other: "My dear, what do you believe has happened . . . ?" He knew the depth and scope of their questions and conjecture.

But Count Viktor Rogozhin, in whose veins the blood of his ancestors ran as deeply blue as the deep heart of the perfect emerald, was a shrewd judge of human nature and he had learned long ago, to his profit, the value of an unanswered question. Familiar with the psychological power of mystery, he was not, on this most important subject of his marriage, going to reverse his policy of secrecy. Let them wonder and debate, he thought.

But the answer to the riddle that rocked St. Petersburg to its starched foundations was deceptively simple. He was marrying Marina Lebedev because he wanted her. He did not love her, he did not desire her for herself, but he wanted her. Why? Because she was her mother's daughter.

It was as simple as that. He had chosen her because of, and not despite, her tarnished origins. And let the guests think what they wished. For once Viktor did not care what society made of him. What they thought of her—of him. Provided she did not cross him. Provided she did not—disobey him. Make him a fool. Viktor's great hands clenched into fists. He'd waited long enough. He'd drag Marina out of her room by her neck if necessary!

"Viktor!" Marina stood at the top of the stairs, her hand poised on the balustrade. She was very much aware of the pretty figure that she struck, standing there with her ivory silk skirts billowing gracefully around her. The scene had been rehearsed too many times in her imagination for her to falter now. There, head tilted ever so slightly to one side, lips curved in a sweet smile, just enough to show off her dimples. Shoulders set back, proud, straight—there must be nothing timid in her carriage at the hour of her triumph; arms held gracefully down, slightly open to set off the swell of her breasts to advantage. She must float like a dancer, the way Mama had taught her.

The wine and the excitement made her head swim with giddy delight. She steadied herself, willing her head to clear. At last the

time had come. She must face her enemies with a cool head, with the poise and dignity befitting the future Countess Rogozhin.

Tall, graceful, and as elegantly dignified as the czar himself, Viktor came up the green-carpeted stairs. He bowed over her hand. "Our guests are most anxious to meet you, my dear." His eyes swept over her, approving, possessive. As his gaze burned over her, Marina suddenly wished that she had not insisted, against the cries and protests of the couturiers, that the décolleté of her gown be lowered. She waited silently for Viktor's approval, a worldly admiration, a sign of love. She had thought to look older, more mature, like a woman, not a girl fresh from the schoolroom. But now she wondered if it would not have been wiser to appear less daring. She was suddenly aware of the exposed snowy whiteness of her offered breasts, his eyes burning over the expanse of her throat, her bosom swelling gently under the silk of her bodice. A thrill of apprehension shot through her, and she repressed a shudder. What was it about him that made her want to cover her body and hide it from his eyes? Why did he make her feel so exposed and vulnerable? Why did this man frighten her? Suddenly she wanted to run from him. Why doesn't he look away? she thought, seized by a sudden panic. I have never seen him like this. Is this the man to whom I have pledged my life?

Viktor's eyes softened for an instant. Was he about to drop the mask? To show her the man behind the legend that he had created for himself? She saw in his eyes the admiration she so craved and desired. But as quickly as it had come, the softness fled. A dark storm of suppressed anger flooded Viktor's features.

Marina quaked inwardly before Viktor's anger, but she held her ground. In the great hall below, the guests were gathered at the foot of the stairs, watching Viktor and his bride. They would not have seen the angry violent streak that lay beneath Viktor's elegant facade, but Marina's blood ran cold from what she saw. She was afraid. What had she done? Why did he look at her that way?

Marina forced herself to be calm, to quiet the nervous fluttering of her heart. She held a brave, rigid smile for the benefit of the onlookers below. "Viktor, what is wrong? What has happened?"

Viktor did not reply. He let the imperturbable, unreadable mask descend over his face once more, too punctiliously con-

scious of the established code of etiquette to vent his anger before his guests. He was a master of the social graces. No matter the provocation, he would not lose face. Public arguments were for servants and slatterns. Men of his class expressed their anger in different ways. In private, behind closed doors. Far from prying eyes and eavesdroppers. He would see to this matter later. It was clear that the girl had much to learn.

For the moment, he contented himself by saying softly, "My dear, where is the necklace I gave you? I was expecting you to wear it tonight. Why are you wearing that cameo?"

"It is a portrait of my mother," Marina replied just as softly, "I must wear it." So that was it! This little cameo the seed of his rage! She would scream before she let him touch it. Be as angry as you like, Viktor Rogozhin, she thought. I will wear it. I am not ashamed of my mother for all that your guests might have hated her and cast her aside. She wanted to cry aloud: I am Marina Lebedev, Tatiana's bastard daughter!

Viktor looked at her coldly. She felt the threat behind his smile. "As you wish," he murmured. "And now, my dear, shall we greet our guests?" He offered her his arm. Slowly, regally, they descended the great marble staircase.

In the ballroom, the orchestra was playing the bridal march. To those crushed together at the foot of the stairs, Viktor and Marina made a striking but unusual pair; he stolid, stern, hard; she coquettish, delicate, mischievous. Both in the full power of their strength.

How different they are from each other, Alenkov thought as he watched them sweep down the staircase. All they have in common is their will, but he knows how to use it, and she does not. She is so young. He will break her. He thought of the sacrificial lamb being led to the altar. With her consent, or against her will, what did it matter? Iphigeneia, awakened or innocent, is still victim.

Two hundred pairs of eyes fastened themselves on Marina. Here she was at long last, the woman they had waited and longed to see, the object of their hours of deliberation, the object of their envy, and the target of their hatred. The crowd watched in mute silence, Romans in the Colosseum when the tigress enters the ring; weighing her strengths and flaws, already pitting her against her adversary, and trying to predict the outcome of



the battle ahead. Only generations of breeding kept them from placing their bets aloud.

Unable to restrain themselves, the women looked at Marina with open curiosity and hidden envy, watching covetously the slightest gesture. They drank the details in greedily—the shockingly low décolleté, the silky curve of her breasts where they burgeoned up from her low-cut gown, the delicate tapering of her waist under the full swelling of her bosom. Small ankles, fine wrists—blood mare. Mouth, too wide, they would agree later, the lips too full for classical beauty. Her eyes were too big, too brashly noticeable, as if even in nature this woman had found a way to express the excess, the innate vulgarity of her mother's kind. Her kind.

Marina steadied herself on Viktor's arm, fighting the eddy of panic that threatened to engulf her as she descended into the maw of the crowd. She had not foreseen that fear would weaken her knees and freeze her spine and suck the courage from her blood. She could feel the waves of hatred wafting up toward her. Here was her jury, stony-hearted in silks and crepe, trying her for some heinous crime whose name she did not know.

Indeed, the ladies had long ago set up the tribunal from which would be handed down the sentence on Marina Lebedev.

Now, with almost total unanimity, the women said to themselves, "I hate her."

"I hope she trips on the carpet and breaks her neck," Anushka Dumilitov prayed. "Perhaps if I stare at her hard enough, I can make her heart stop, the way witches do. Please, God, I'll do anything you want, only please make something terrible happen to her!"

Viktor came down the stairs slowly, excruciatingly slowly, every step an agony in which Marina felt herself naked, exposed, and vulnerable to the eyes of the hostile mob. The smile, her badge of pride, remained fixed on her lips. She held her back very straight. Look all you want, I don't care, she thought defiantly, I am with Viktor and you cannot hurt me.

She forced herself to look into the sea of faces below her. With the instinct of a hunted animal she looked first at the most dangerous foe. What she saw in the eyes of those women was crueler than she had ever dreamed. Her heart began pounding. Her courage threatened to falter, but she braced herself resolutely against panic. She tried to look down without seeing the faces.

She concentrated on the vivid array of color, the random pattern of the reds and blues and greens of the women's gowns against the darker tones of the men's evening clothes.

But the men were looking at her too. From the youngest there to the senior gentlemen, there was uncritical admiration. Let their wives say what they would, the girl was beautiful, superb. Rogozhin was a very lucky man.

"Tatiana," one man murmured, half to himself, half aloud. He spoke for all the men who had known the famous ballerina. "It is Tatiana when she was young." "She is perfect, flawless, she is exquisite," thought Felix Dumilittov. His heart pounded wildly against the breast of his new uniform. He must dance with her, at all costs. "She is a goddess," Von Eggling said to himself as he adjusted his monocle surreptitiously. A wood sprite, no, the goddess of fire. No, Diana, the virgin huntress. But wait. Perhaps not. No, on closer inspection, not Diana at all. But what a beauty.

Lucky Viktor Rogozhin, the men thought, with the same silent uniformity of choice exhibited by their women. How they envied Count Rogozhin. Small wonder the man had lost his head. To lie beside that girl, to take her in one's arms and caress that smooth, satiny skin . . . What would one not give for husbandly obligations like that!

Only one man did not envy Viktor. In the corner where he stood leaning in the embrasure of the doorway, Captain Sergei Rogozhin smiled in stunned disbelief. So this was Viktor's fiancée, he thought incredulously. This saucy, mischievous creature was Viktor's beloved. Why this was a child of a girl, hardly out of convent school! A kitten, not even a cat! Sergei suppressed a wild desire to laugh.

How had this chit of a girl lured stern, dour Viktor to the altar? By what secret device had she extracted a wedding ring from him where many more worldly women had failed? Why, she was no more than a child, and a penniless child to boot, if rumor was to be trusted. Sergei's eyes sparkled with amusement. He was glad he had come to meet Viktor's bride.

Yes, the girl was a beauty, there was no doubt of that. Delicate, feline, passionate, probably, but what good would that do her with staid, stuffy Viktor? Sergei noted the swell of her breasts against the gossamer silk of her gown, her silky shoulders. She was a trifle young for his taste, but she promised a capacity of sensual delight that was very tempting. In time, and under fa-

vorable conditions, she might develop into a very interesting woman. But sharing a marriage bed with Viktor Rogozhin could hardly come under the title of "favorable conditions." Still, one never would know, and after this surprise tonight, anything could be true of Viktor. Perhaps the girl does love him, Sergei thought. Perhaps Viktor is more passionate than he seems. Perhaps I have always misjudged him. But, no—it's impossible—dear Viktor is no match for this girl. She'll make a cuckold of him before the season is out.

Sergei studied the girl appraisingly. She had a fine carriage and a winning delicate voluptuousness, this little upstart. A tempting piece, but not worth the trouble. He was familiar with the type—half-woman, half-child, part wide-eyed innocent, part shrew. They were a willful, spoiled, and demanding breed who drove their lovers to distraction with inexplicable tantrums and piques of temper.

Sergei felt a flash of pity for his vain, domineering cousin. Poor Viktor! That chippy will break you and bring you to your knees unless you ride her firmly from the start.

As Viktor and Marina reached the bottom of the stairs, the guests pushed forward to crowd around them. But there was a stir and the guests were pushed apart. Baroness Malinkova burst toward the couple, the train of her black gown sweeping imperiously behind her.

"So this is your bride, Count Rogozhin?" she asked loudly. "This ill-mannered creature who keeps her guests waiting? This girl who adds rudeness to her tainted reputation?" Her eyes bright pinpoints of malicious fire, she pointed her finger at Marina. The others watched, fascinated.

"I know who you are, I know what you are!" the old crone shrieked. "You don't need that cameo around your neck to remind us. We know only too well."

The baroness turned triumphantly on Viktor. "Mark my words, Count Rogozhin. You will rue the day you made this guttersnipe your wife. Beware, or you will find the doors of St. Petersburg closed to you one by one."

Viktor paled visibly, and he brushed past the old woman. "Tell the orchestra to play a waltz," he ordered. "The dancing will begin."

"You will regret this, Count!" the enraged baroness shouted after them.

Marina's knees were suddenly weak. She was afraid she would fall. She clung desperately to Viktor's arm. He held her strongly: his hand firm and viselike on her elbow, supporting her.

"Let the dancing begin." Viktor smiled and waved the guests toward the ballroom. But they did not move. Fascinated, they watched Viktor and Marina and the enraged baroness.

The old woman swept the room with glittering eyes, defying the guests to move. It would go hard for them if they crossed her. She had power on her side. The air crackled with electricity. Who would defy the queen of St. Petersburg for the sake of Tatiana's bastard child?

A man pushed past the old baroness. "Allow me, mademoiselle, the honor of this first dance," said a deep, confident voice. "With your permission, Count." Before she could grasp what was happening, Marina found herself propelled into the ballroom, in the arms of a man she had never seen.

"But who—?" she gasped.

"Shhh!" The stranger placed his hand firmly on the small of her back and swept her onto the parquet dance floor. He moved gracefully, but surprise made her dizzy. She lost her balance and stumbled toward him. The rough cloth of his uniform grazed her naked shoulder.

"There, now," said the stranger, steadying her. "One, two, three, one, two, three, keep time with the music, don't let the old dragon know she has upset you."

Regaining her balance, Marina flushed and squirmed angrily. Who was this man to snatch her so unceremoniously from Viktor's side? "How dare you," she hissed. "Take me back to Count Rogozhin at once."

"Quiet, smile prettily. Look, the others are coming in to the dance. The old woman will die of an epileptic fit."

"No, let me go." Marina tried to wrench away, but he held her firmly, her face crushed against his shoulder. He was tall and lean; she could feel the tight, strong muscles in his arms and the long, hard line of his thigh as his legs brushed casually against her. He had broad, powerful shoulders. Marina squirmed and pulled her head back to see his face—she looked up into a pair of hard gray eyes. Yes, the man was handsome in a wild, piratical way. Dark hair framed the strong lines of his face, but Marina was too angry to find him dashing. "How dare you handle me so presumptuously," she hissed.

Laughter twinkled roguishly in the stranger's eyes. She longed to strike him. "Hush, sweetheart. Your friend the baroness will hear you and say you have no manners." She heard the laughter in his voice! Rage, a desire to kill, and an unidentifiable sensation flooded through Marina's veins. She felt suddenly naked. She was painfully aware of the iron strength of the arms that held her. The wool of his uniform prickled the bare flesh of her arms. His hand pressed the small of her back possessively.

"It is quite useless to squirm, my dear Mademoiselle Lebedev," the stranger whispered. "I am your cousin Sergei Rogozhin. The vows you take tomorrow will bind us together forever." He smiled sweetly down at her, amused by her anger. "You may as well reconcile yourself to me, as I am one of the many things you gain by becoming Viktor's wife."

For a second his laughing eyes held her. The corners of his strong, hard mouth twitched with ill-suppressed merriment.

"You are impudent, Sergei Rogozhin," Marina snapped. Her amethyst eyes blazed up at him. "I hate you already."

Sergei felt the stubborn straightness of her spine under his fingers as she tried to pull away from him, and he held her firmly. A pretty wench! A woman of spirit. All the more pity. Viktor was not the sort of man to appreciate her. Doubtless she would find others who would. "I suggest, dearest cousin, that you control your hatred of me—which, by the way, many others share—and try to be polite, as I have just now saved your very pretty neck from the baroness's ax."

"Captain Rogozhin," Marina choked helplessly as he led her adroitly through the graceful steps of the waltz, "I would be most obliged if you would let me go."

"Ah, that's better. See how fast you learn? But why let go of you, my darling girl, when I have just found you?" Sergei teased. "Never. Besides, what would your guests think if you left your own dear cousin in the middle of a dance? All these people dancing by us—the worthies come to Viktor's party to meet his shy, blushing bride. It would be hard to live down such an unpropitious entrance into society. What would people think?"

As if by magic, he felt the fight drain out of her. Her body softened as she relaxed in his arms. He stared down at her unbelievably. Was it possible that this girl, this magnificent, spirited hussy actually cared what people thought? She, who defied every convention to marry Viktor Rogozhin, she, the scandal of the

season, cared what these stuffy, ordinary people thought of her? Cared what these old cats and their uxorious spouses had to say? He studied her upturned face with renewed interest.

"You don't love Viktor," Sergei said with a flash of insight. He felt her stiffen against him, and he regretted his words. Marina shot him a cold, haughty look, a startling contrast to the warm, unconscious voluptuousness of her body. She looked like an angry little girl on the verge of a tantrum. If he let her go, would she stamp her foot and shake the hairpins out of her hair? A picture of her, hair tumbled around her bare shoulders, the dark ringlets on her smooth skin, flashed through Sergei's mind. How delectable! But what a little witch she could be. Poor Viktor!

"Of course I love him," Marina spat. "How dare you be so impertinent?"

Sergei could not resist. "Do you, dear child?" he whispered tauntingly.

Marina's full lips tightened. She was piqued beyond measure at his bantering tone. "I love him as much as I hate you," she hissed. "That is more than a man like you could ever imagine."

Sergei fought a desire to laugh. She had temperament, at least, but she was a spoiled, willful child who needed to be taught a lesson or two. That, by God, was Viktor's job. It was a shame that such a beautiful body, such a proud, sensual face, should hide the soul of a brattish infant. "You are an ungrateful woman." He smiled. "Here I risk life and limb to save you from the clutches of an old dragon, and you reward me with your hatred. If I were Viktor," he continued, very conscious of her breasts heaving against him as she choked back her anger, "I would turn you over my knee and give you the spanking you so apparently deserve. Just like a naughty child."

"How dare you call me a child!" she sputtered indignantly. "Let me go. Right now, this instant." Tears of rage burned in her eyes and trembled on her lashes.

"As you wish, dear cousin." Her tears made him ashamed of his teasing. He'd gone too far. He'd forgotten that she was only a child. Sergei led her to the edge of the dance floor, where he bowed over her hand. Instantly other men flocked around her, begging for the next waltz.

"My dear mademoiselle, I beseech you . . ."

"No, I insist . . ."

"No, I must dance with you now!"

Marina laughed coquettishly as the young soldiers and dignified bankers fought over her. At last, after much confusion, she made her choice. She flashed Sergei a look of hatred and smiled pointedly at her new partner, fluttering her lashes. Little vixen, Sergei thought, amused and a little sad. Without a strong man to love her, this girl would never grow into womanhood. In a year or two, Viktor's wife will be as petulant and difficult and dull as the other women here. Well, he thought with an inward shrug, she belongs to Viktor, she is Viktor's problem. Sergei closed his mind to his cousin's bride and took himself off in search of more amusing company.



Alone in the passenger compartment of the long black Daimler Benz, Darya Ivanovna Berenskaya rested languorously against the cushions. The car rolled smoothly through the night, but her thoughts were far removed from the magnificent city through which she sped.

She closed her eyes and sighed a deep, thankful breath. She felt better now. It was gone—gone the craving, the sharp, tearing pain that tore her loins and made her body twitch uncontrollably under its force. Willfully she had delayed the injection, even though her flesh begged for the lifeblood which was more vital to her than the blood that flowed in her veins and pounded through her heart. The waiting made her feel more strongly the thrill of release, the deep warm glow as the blood coursed through her body and brought her back to life.

Her head lolled heavily against the neckrest. The hem of her black dress was pushed back above her open thighs. Below the beads of sparkling jet that twinkled on her skirt, a tiny drop of blood glistened on the inside of her long, smooth thigh where the needle had left its mark.

Morphine. Paris. The two bound inextricably together in her mind, just as the warm glow that flooded over her was now



linked with the memory of the man who had shown her this world which was a world of the gods. To him she owed this drug without which her life no longer had substance or meaning. Her teacher. Her lover. Her master in the world of voluptuary pleasures. The only man she wanted, the one on earth before whom her soul was naked, adoring, trembling, quiescent, beyond desire.

Now, as always, when she was separated from him, Darya thought of her lover. Her mind went back to that cold, sunny morning in Paris when their lives had crossed. A morning filled with bright light, and with pain, the harsh dawn of a life that was to bind them together forever.

She was very young then, only nineteen, sent from Russia to study at the conservatory in Paris, to drink in the rich culture of the gay French capital. A child she had been then, naive, innocent, the depths of her passionate nature not yet plumbed, the dark, uncontrollable forces of her spirit dormant and unsuspected. It had taken her lover to release those forces in her. With him, her real life had begun.

She could not remember now on what foolish errand she was bound, nor what foolish dreams filled her head on that winter morning. A crowded sidewalk, the terrified scream of an old woman, the rattle of the wheels on the cobbled street as the carriage bore down upon her. Plunging horses. The iron-rimmed carriage wheel crushing the delicate bones of her ankle as easily as a man might break a matchstick between his fingers.

She did not know how long she lay in a semicoma, the terrible pain in her leg quieted only by a drug whose name she did not know. She had a vague memory of the doctors trying to mend her poor, ruined ankle. Someone was beside her, a stranger holding her when the pain became too strong to bear. But through the haze of the opiate, she could not make out his face.

She saw him clearly for the first time only when her ordeal was over, her shattered leg healed at last. An elegant carriage was drawn up before the gates of the hospital. And he was there, waiting for her as he had waited since the cold sunny morning when she stepped under the iron wheel. Without a word, Darya surrendered herself to him, for he was her master. She hungered for the opiate he gave her, without which she could no longer live. In her soul she craved this surrender to his will. More than love bound them, for with him Darya was free at last to explore

the dark, hidden mysteries of her own nature. With him she could become the woman she had always been, for here at last she had found a man whose deep, violent passion matched her own.

The beautiful, ivory-skinned woman opened her green eyes and gazed dreamily from behind her lashes. Her blond hair was tied into a heavy knot at the base of her neck. A rope of priceless sapphires sparkled at her throat and twinkled on the white expanse of her bosom. Her soft, full lips parted slightly and she panted under the caress of the drug. She luxuriated in the deep softness of the banquette, and her senses throbbed warmly, enveloping her in a soft, gossamer cloud. Good, it was beginning to take effect. The warm, life-giving glow of the morphine spread through her, calming her, making her strong. Her limbs felt heavy, deliciously numb, as if she had just come from the arms of her lover. She was ready now for what lay ahead; the bright lights, the bantering conversations, the man. . . .

But no. Not yet. Let them wait. Let her take time to savor a few previous minutes of this magical, serene solitude before facing the storm. What she had to accomplish tonight could be done quickly, easily. She could steal a few more minutes of blissful solitude.

Darya stirred, rousing herself out of the dream. She smoothed her dress back over her silken knees, and leaning forward, rapped with a gloved hand against the glass that separated her from the chauffeur.

The young driver pushed the window open without turning his eyes from the road. "Yes, madame?" His voice was polite, neutral. It betrayed nothing of the heated fantasies which the beauty of his passenger set off in his mind.

"We are not going directly to the Rogozhin estate," Darya said. The big car slowed obediently. "I wish to drive through the city. The next bridge leads to the Peterhof district. Take it," the blond woman said imperiously.

"But, madame," the chauffeur sputtered in surprise, "the Peterhof is dangerous at this time of night. There is no telling what might happen—"

"Do as you are told," Darya ordered sharply. She snapped the window shut to prevent further discussion. Dangerous! They were all alike, afraid, cowed by shadows. But she was not afraid. Fear was a worm the man in Paris had taught her to grind under

the heel of her slipper. Yet how it feasted in the hearts of men; it ate their strength, it made them weak. Still they clung to it, because in the end, it was all they knew. Fear, and the pale emotion they called love. Darya's mouth curved in a disdainful smile. Fools, she thought.

The chauffeur turned the car off the wide avenue. The Peterhof! A nesting ground for thieves, a place so desperate, so vile, that even the police avoided it. In a city jaded to riots and the incendiary violence of saboteurs and anarchists, the Peterhof still remained the most fearful section of the city. The young driver suppressed a shudder. The automobile would be a tempting target.

For an instant he toyed with the idea of bringing the whirring machine to a halt. Refusing point-blank to make the dangerous detour. But the woman intimidated him. Her serene, beautiful face had a cold look of command that made disobedience impossible. It would not be pleasant to see those green eyes burn in anger, or the sensual mouth twist in rage. No, better even the perils of the Peterhof than that. He squared his shoulders with resigned bravado and drove on.

The car slid through the dark, quiet night. Avenues melted into streets, streets narrowed into lanes, lanes into twisted alleys where the car danced on the cobblestones. It slid between rows of squalid houses, an incongruous phantom among the ruins. He pressed hard on the gas pedal, easing the automobile forward. We will never get out of here alive, the driver thought. He began to sweat. At last the road began to widen, and the nightmare village receded behind them. The iron stanchions of the Nicholas Bridge loomed ahead of them. The driver drew a sigh of relief. Thank God and all the saints, they had made it through. But this was a night he would never forget.

The car headed for the open space, motor humming silkily under the shining black hood.

In the compartment in the back of the car, Darya thought about the man she was to meet tonight. She would flirt, tease, seduce. She would give herself to him without a flicker of hesitation if necessary. Ugly, handsome, what did it matter? she thought with serene detachment. Her flesh was a weapon, a lure. The body under the seductive black gown a bait, her smile a snare. Darya knew her power. Poor man, he would not see the trap until it was too late.

The car lurched to a stop. What did that fool driver mean by this? She tapped impatiently on the glass. "Go on," she ordered. There was no reply. Darya gave a sigh of exasperation and peered through the curtains at the windows. The chauffeur had stepped out of the car. He was walking toward two men who stood blocking the roadway ahead.

With the speed of an unthinking reflex, Darya pulled a small, delicate pistol from the top of her stocking. She cocked it quickly—the hammer snapped into place with a sharp click. Holding the gun firmly, Darya jerked the door handle forward and stepped out of the car in a single fluid motion.

They were stopped along a bridge. Ahead, across the river, the massive stone palaces near the English Quay loomed ponderous and distant in the moonlight. Behind them, the rubble of the Peterhof slums. It was quiet.

The men loomed out of the night, menacing hulks in shapeless tattered clothes. They advanced toward the car, their eyes fastened on the chauffeur. The first man was tall, broad-shouldered, and massive under his rags. In the white light of the headlamps, his eyes were small, threatening under his shabby cap. A second man lurked behind the giant, lithe and wiry, taut and alert. A knife glinted in his hand. The chauffeur began to back away as the man advanced, stalking him.

Darya stole stealthily around the far side of the automobile and slipped between the headlamps that flanked the hood. Wrapped in the light which blazed over the bridge, she was invisible to the men in the darkness, protected. The glare of the lamps shone in their eyes and concealed her like a cloak. She waited.

The men were closing in. The chauffeur stood frozen in his tracks. "What do you want?" he would have shouted, but the words died on his trembling lips. Beads of sweat prickled coldly on his forehead. The fetid stench that emanated from the two beggars washed over him. His fear-sickened stomach churned queasily. Seeing his fear, the first man laughed. He waved a knife in his long fingers, stabbing the air with the glinting, deadly blade. "Come closer, my fine gentleman," he jeered.

Darya kept her eyes on the man lurking behind him. She saw him pull a revolver from his waistband, but before he had time to aim, the gun in her hand cracked to life. The man was hurtled

onto the road, blood spilling from his throat. He shuddered and lay still.

The first man froze. He looked disbelievingly at the car, searching for a second enemy. He saw nothing. He blinked to clear his eyes, hesitated, then lunged, knife aloft, at the driver. The chauffeur staggered back, a hair's breadth out of range as the blade plunged in a wide arc. The beggar reeled, thrown off balance by the blow which carried all his weight behind it and found no target.

Swearing, the giant steadied himself. "Over here," Darya hissed. She stepped away from the car, the outline of her body silhouetted against the twin beacons. "Come to me." The man shielded his face with his hand, and peered into the brightness. "Come." He saw her, a shadowy figure suspended in the blinding light. Darya's diaphanous black gown molded her body, her golden hair shimmered like a halo. She was vulnerable, defenseless, almost naked, terrifying and beautiful. Against the backdrop of light, she was a goddess. The man gaped. He never saw the pistol in her hand, but a chill of fear cut through him, and the blade dropped from his fingers and clattered onto the stones.

He whimpered and tried to run, but his legs would not obey. He inched backward. An atavistic fear forbade him to look away. When he turned, she would strike. Cautiously he crept, slinking toward the safety of the darkness, out of the circle of light. His foot struck a stone; he stumbled and fell.

At that moment Darya's finger twitched on the trigger of her gun. The ball exploded from the chamber. The man shrieked, his hand clawed the air and dropped back by his side. A dark stain began to form on his breast.

Unhurriedly Darya walked over to the dead man. She prodded him with the toe of her slipper. A cursory glance sufficed to assure her that he was beyond the tender mercies of her gun. She returned to the waiting car. With impassive eyes she watched the shaking chauffeur slide back behind the wheel.

"Drive on to the Rogozhin address," she ordered.



Anton Voroshilov was a man in the prime of his life. Only three years stood between him and forty, and if he was a stern-looking man, he was nonetheless strikingly handsome in a saturnine way. Reserved, elegant, distinguished in both dress and manner, he had none of the opulent vulgarity that characterized so many of his contemporaries. He was tall, his hair dark, features aquiline and chiseled. Deep lines furrowed the corners of his mouth, giving him the look of a Roman senator; he was stark, strong, as hard as the Okhrana itself. Voroshilov was impervious to the charm of luxury, unaffected by the lure of money, for he had both at his disposal—and like most other things, they had long since ceased to interest him. As for women, he did not need them for anything beyond the simple animal pleasure they provided.

There was only one passion in his life, the love of order. He was incorruptible, unyielding, unbreakable, a man designed by God to rule over lesser, weaker beings.

By the time he arrived at the party, Anton Voroshilov was too weary to view the evening ahead of him with anything but exasperation. Now, of all times, with the political winds blowing in the smell of powder and the rattle of sabers, he was hard pressed

to spare the time demanded by frivolous festivities. The day had been a grueling exercise in patience, perseverance, and the kind of diplomatic double-talk which he found so frustrating but at which he was so accomplished. The strain of the interviews at Tsarkoe Selo had tried even his prowess in tact and courtesy. Nicholas Romanov was a stubborn man, and very often a stupid one. What would the adoring crowds who lined the prospects for a glimpse of his carriage think if they knew that even as the kaiser blustered and howled for an answer to his ultimatum, the czar had run to the mad monk Rasputin? No matter the disparaging comments Nicholas had made in the past about the starets' power—in time of crisis, he had spent precious hours deliberating the message the wild-eyed peasant had sent in answer to the sovereign's plea for advice.

"If you do this, Russia will fall, you will be no more," the czarina's favorite had replied. When he saw Rasputin's telegram, Voroshilov's heart had leaped with relief. For once the holy madman had anticipated his desires. There must be no war.

Anton Voroshilov was not a squeamish man. It was not the fear of blood or compassion for the wounded and dying that fueled his aversion to the war. He had a deep distrust for the military machine, or what passed for such in the Russia of Nicholas Romanov. As head of the Okhrana, Voroshilov had access to the files of the policia in the whole of Russia. The secret dossiers ran the gamut from the czar himself to the most petty bureaucrats. With great care Anton Voroshilov had studied the files of the generals and senior army officials. What he had seen there made him shudder. And the tale they told boded ill for Russia in the face of war.

The common soldiery was in the hands of self-important aristocratic idlers, dedicated to the pleasures of life, the charms of their mistresses, the excitements of the racetrack, and the privileges of their position. They spared little thought to training the army—that enormous body of men on whom they would depend in the midst of battle. Few of the generals had set foot inside a military university after their own schooldays. The majority of the czar's military counselors were unacquainted with weapons or tactics developed in the past quarter century. The importance of the armored tank, barbed wire, machine guns, escaped them. Sukhomlinov himself, the chief of staff, had been heard to boast that he did not believe in machine guns, that the Russian armies

did not need them, that they would overwhelm the Germans with force of numbers alone. Perhaps the good general meant to bury the kaiser under the weight of Russian bodies, Voroshilov mused.

But there was more behind Voroshilov's hatred of the army. It was a fact of power that the czar lived in uneasy truce with his army—the men he called his beloved sons. Nicholas II was no less suspicious than his forefathers. He lived in constant fear of a military mutiny, a rebellion that would rise up and break him. So he turned to the secret police, the Okhrana, to help him. With the power of the Okhrana pitted against the army, the guile and strength of men like Voroshilov set in a constant surveillance of the army, the right hand of Russia turned against the left, the two organs of state were locked in a battle for supremacy.

No, Voroshilov prayed inwardly, there must be peace at all costs. If the czar declared for mobilization, the military would surely take the upper hand. The Okhrana would suffer great loss of power, while the army wreaked chaos and disorder everywhere in Russia, like children set loose in a glass shop. But it was more than professional interest. Voroshilov loathed disorder from the depths of his soul. Nothing was more repugnant to him than inefficiency, waste, turmoil. In them was the breeding ground of the monster anarchy and its inevitable successor, revolution. If the czar listened to his generals and threw himself into the war, disaster lay ahead. The Romanov dynasty—and Russia—would be doomed. It did not take an unwashed monk to see that.

The long hours in the czar's chambers had taken their toll on the head of the Othrina. Now he must engage in hours of pointless chatter, bend over the hands of superannuated females, and pretend to listen to the advice of flatulent financiers. He was tired, he longed to go back to his office and review once more the arguments that would sway Nicholas in favor of peace. If he insisted enough, he might still be able to stop this tidal wave of empty patriotism that was carrying Russia toward destruction. Voroshilov sighed inwardly. No, he was resigned. There was nothing left now but to wait for the answer that must come tomorrow. Wait and amuse oneself as best as one could. Besides, not to attend this occasion was unthinkable. He had accepted the invitation too long ago to rescind on it now, and if the truth be known, he was too exhausted to go back to the dossiers that lay



on his desk. In all events, he knew it was hopeless. He had done all he could.

One thought cheered him. Perhaps Von Eggeling would be at the Rogozhin affair. He knew that an invitation had been sent to the German embassy, and he hoped that the tall, monocled German had accepted. All Voroshilov asked was a brief interview, a few moments alone with the man who was better briefed on the German position than any other but himself.

Arriving at the Rogozhin estate, he sought out his host and went through the required formalities. He could see that the count was under some apparent strain, although he took great pains to appear relaxed and at ease.

"My dear friend," Rogozhin pressed Voroshilov's hand between his fleshy palms. "How delighted I am that you could join us. Have you had some champagne, or perhaps you would prefer brandy?"

Voroshilov waved the offer aside with a graceful gesture. "Do not inconvenience yourself on my account, I beg of you. I must apologize for arriving so late, my dear Count. And permit me to express my very sincere congratulations, and my best wishes for your future happiness."

Rogozhin replied with a courtly bow. "Come and meet the other guests," he said. "My bride is dancing, and I will present her to you later, as soon as I can lure her off the dance floor." Voroshilov heard an angry undertone in the count's voice, an edge that his practiced smile could not disguise.

Voroshilov was surprised by the unconscious menace in Rogozhin's voice. What a despicable creature he is, he reflected, sensing the force of the rage seething behind the count's carefully presented exterior. If his bride can rouse him to such pitches of fury, he could be dangerous and unpredictable indeed when faced by sterner issues. Here is a man who will stop at nothing, who will turn and twist the law to best achieve his ends. The deputy of the Okhrana knew this kind of man and his power in Russia, where power and influence were all. Professing to love order, logic, the rule of law—in truth, plotting, violence, and murder were the weapons they used. Here were the true anarchists, the men above the law. The faction from whom the regime had most to fear, for they could resort to anything, if the circumstances were right. In the chaos that was sure to come, men like Rogozhin would be a dangerous, deadly breed. Voroshi-

lov made a mental note to review Rogozhin's dossier in the morning.

He separated himself from the fawning Rogozhin, and after a cursory search of the salons, found the tall German ambassador. Von Eggeling was engaged in conversation with three men, one in somber evening dress and the two others in uniform. One of the soldiers, tall, well-built, young, wore the uniform of a captain of the cossack regiment. The other military man was a portly, short creature whose chest blazed with freshly polished medals. Even at his distant vantage point, Anton Voroshilov recognized the beribboned soldier easily. It was Major General Basil Babatsov, a prime example of the sort of military tactician that would plunge Russia into defeat if given a chance. Voroshilov sighed inwardly as he approached the enclave of men. General Babatsov was talking, as usual. He loved the sound of his own voice. He was expounding on some point which he had no doubt been discussing all evening, venting his ill-founded views on anyone who would listen.

Voroshilov caught Von Eggeling's eye. Over the top of the rotund speaker's head, the German diplomat gave him a smile of recognition. For an instant Voroshilov thought that he saw the dignified Prussian raise an eyebrow disparagingly. Poor man, he has been forced to listen to this palaver all night!

"New tactics be damned," the general said with barracks-room bravado. "What's wrong with the old tactics? Have we ever used them and lost our wars? Hmmm?" he demanded, jabbing his finger at the young soldier's chest. It was apparent that the captain was the cause of this outbreak of defensive pride.

"Not yet." The young man laughed, flashing his strong white teeth in a smile that bordered on impertinence. "But then, you have not yet faced the newest German artillery pieces. Not only do we not possess weapons of that caliber and range, but our own gunners are untrained and unfit to man the guns they have."

The general waved his fat arms. "What of Napoleon?" he sputtered in a magnificent non sequitur. "What of that, my fine young tactician?"

The captain fixed the older man with a serious, respectful gaze, but Voroshilov was aware that the man was struggling against a desire to laugh. He studied the soldier more closely. He had seen him before. Ah, yes, he remembered very clearly now. This was young Rogozhin, the one who had caused such an

uproar several years ago. A rakehell, but a smart man, if his memory served him well. Perhaps too smart for his own good.

"Napoleon, yes." Sergei paused for dramatic effect. "But Napoleon came to us alone, with a few hundred thousand soldiers and nothing more. He did not have the Krupp factories behind him, and he was thousands of miles from his supply lines, without benefit of the modern German railways. Besides, he was French, and as delightful as those people are, their talents do not lie in military matters."

There were muffled sounds of amusement from the men who listened from the fringes of the small knot of men. He is right, Voroshilov thought, and he looked sharply at the German to check his reaction. Von Eggeling's face was an impassive mask; his eyes did not so much as flicker. It was impossible to guess what he might be thinking.

"Captain Rogozhin, if I remember?" Voroshilov said softly. "I am Anton Voroshilov, at your service." The two men shook hands. "You answer the general with a certain confidence. How can you be so sure of your stand? From where do you draw this startling information of the kaiser's preparedness?"

He felt, rather than saw, Von Eggeling lean forward to listen.

Sergei hesitated. He knew very well who this man was, and he knew his power. A wink from the deputy of the Okhrana had meant Siberia for countless Russians who spoke too easily, too carelessly. He longed for the freedom of thoughtless banter that was so happily enjoyed in France. For all he knew, Voroshilov could call him a traitor and throw him into prison before the night was out.

"I have just returned from France, as you may well know," Sergei replied blandly, not missing the hint of amusement that lit Voroshilov's eyes at the oblique mention of his exile. "On my journey here, I traveled through large parts of Germany. What I saw was a country preparing for war, arming itself for the future. The Germans were quite happy to let me witness their preparations. They have devised weapons of which the Russian soldier cannot even conceive. They have stockpiled their guns for years, while we have contented ourselves with parades, useless drills, and parties."

Dimitri Alenkov, following the exchange from a distance, watched Babatsov's face redden deeply. This Captain Rogozhin was right. The czar himself had said, "We need heroes. They do

not need to have done anything heroic, so long as they look the part." Was Babatsov the type of hero the czar wanted?

Sergei cleared his throat. He met Voroshilov's hard blue eyes unflinchingly. "If there is a war," he said, "Russia will fall. Nothing can prevent it. Not even the Okhrana can save it."

Voroshilov looked about him, made sure that every ear was listening before he spoke. "If there is a war, Captain Rogozhin," he said softly but clearly, "our armies may collapse, the regime itself may fall, but Russia will always remain. And the Okhrana will be there to guard it."

Sergei understood the warning: Be careful, Captain, you tread very close to treason. But the arrogant pride of Voroshilov infuriated him. "Yes, Deputy, the Okhrana will remain. In Russia there will always be room for the secret police."

Von Eggeling, a diplomat to the tips of his fingers, moved quickly. "My friends, all night there has been talk of war," he pleaded in a bantering tone. "If we do engage in battle, we will all soon be tired of this kind of debate, and if there is to be no conflict, we are wasting words on useless conjecture. Let us speak of more pleasant things."

Voroshilov bowed dryly to the assembled gentlemen. Young Rogozhin is as brave as his words, the deputy thought. Little does he know that we share the same views. "With your permission, gentlemen, Herr Von Eggeling and I have urgent business to discuss. I assure you it has nothing whatever to do with the current unpleasantness. May I take him from you?"

"In Russia, they say that if there is a war, it will be over by the first snow of winter. In Berlin they promise that it will end before the first leaves fall from the trees," Von Eggeling said graciously. "Let us hope that they are both wrong, gentlemen, and that all this will end before the first stars pale in the sky tomorrow."

With that, the two men, from opposing camps but old friends, pulled away from the others. They spoke as friends, with the pretense of diplomacy dropped away.

Von Eggeling was the first to voice what was on both their minds. "So, my friend. What luck did you have today with your czar and his retinue of archdukes?"

"Very little. He will mobilize, but even he would be hard pressed to state the reasons why. The sovereignty of Serbia! Absurd. It is his damnable pride, his inability to fight against those who shout the loudest in his ear."

"The kaiser has his own pride, and I confess that my entreaties have been as poorly taken as your own, Anton. In a moment of pique, he delivers the ultimatum, and now, because of his swollen pride, he must back it up with all his strength. Unfortunately for Europe, your young Captain Rogozhin is right. Germany's strength"—he paused, and touched the arm of the Russian as if to say that their own friendship was beyond such petty squabbles—"our strength is great. Too great. The kaiser has weapons stock-piled throughout the country. He is a careless, impatient child, and like a child he must use the toys he has been given."

"Then it has passed out of our hands." Voroshilov sighed with resignation. "We have brought it upon ourselves. Every year we have armed, and spoken of peace. The French, the English, the Austrians, our two nations, armed like savages, and like savages we will now spill each other's blood. Each year the situation in the Balkans became more precarious, and we ignored it. We ignored the sale of arms. We pretended not to see that the man who sold his weapons to the Balkan generals goaded the czar and the kaiser into arming themselves. We could not see it because we refused to believe that one man could have so much power—and now we will pay for it. This war is his *chef d'oeuvre*, his master work."

"We live in a bitter age, my friend," Von Eggeling said sadly, his voice suddenly flat and weary. "The world is ruled by fools and run by merchants. When this war happens, as it inevitably will, the gun merchant will have achieved his goal. The world as we know it will be in ruins. Order dissolved into anarchy and everything we hold dear ground into the dust."

"I would like to see that man's brains splattered around him under the bullets of his own guns," Voroshilov said. "I would like that very much."



The evening must never end, please, dear God. Let it go on and on forever, in this beautiful room with these elegant ladies and gentlemen dancing around me, smiling, kind. Marina had not stopped dancing all night. One after the other, the men claimed her for the waltzes, the mazurkas, the polonaises. Again and again she had been forced to choose her partners among many. And the vexed expressions on the women's faces did nothing to dampen her spirits. In time, they would come around and flutter over her just as the men were already doing. The magic of Viktor's power was already at work. It wrapped itself around her like a silken cloak, light, luxurious, warm. She was Viktor's bride—the past would be forgotten soon enough. Why, some of the women had even softened and smiled in her direction as she whirled past them in the arms of her partner.

Marina's eyes were soft with happiness. Yes, she thought joyfully, everything will be as I planned, everything. No one can hurt me now, not Viktor's cousin with his hard, mocking eyes, not the old woman and her cruel words. She tried to humiliate me and she failed. Viktor is too strong.

She smiled to herself, and those who saw her sail on the dance floor in a whirl of ruffles and lace thought how radiant and

lovely she was. Baroness Malinkova was gone, alas, and not here to witness her triumph, but from the corner of her eye Marina saw Sergei Rogozhin, and she willed him to turn, to look at her, to behold her in all the strength of her power. You can never touch me, she wanted to cry aloud. I am Viktor's. I am safe.

But Sergei Rogozhin did not hear the girl in the ivory frock silently calling to him. He was engaged with a woman much more to his taste than Viktor's spoiled, frivolous bride.

"Darya, my darling, when did you leave Paris?"

"Not long after you, *chéri*." The blond woman's impassive green eyes never left his face. She smiled up at him, her wide red lips curving seductively. "You know I cannot bear to be away from you," she whispered throatily.

Sergei gave her an appraising glance. He had spent too many hours with the beautiful Darya to trust a single word she spoke, but he could not help the desire that burned in him at the memory of their last encounter. She was a magnificent woman and a creature made for love, a goddess. The deep sensuality of her white body, the erotic instincts which she obeyed without hesitation, without inhibition, without restraint, see her apart from all the other women he had known. Meeting her here at Viktor's was an unexpected pleasure, a delightful opportunity which he was not foolish enough to let slip through his fingers.

"How wonderful to find you in Russia, my love. Was it really for my sake that you fled the pleasures of Paris to come to this dreary place?"

"Yes," said Darya softly, "among other things."

"Such as . . ."

"My father is dead. I must go see to things on his estate in Kolumna."

"Ah," Sergei exclaimed in surprise. "Then you are in mourning, my poor Darya."

The blond woman read his thoughts as clearly as if he had spoken them aloud. No, she would not disappoint him tonight. Besides, Sergei Rogozhin was an excellent lover. "He was very old. God did not mean us to grieve forever over the inevitable."

Sergei smiled. "Come." He led her toward the front of the house. Tucked in behind the stairs there was a small library, thoughtfully equipped with a deep leather sofa. They would have privacy there.

Behind the heavy doors, Darya laughed and kicked off one

slipper as Sergei pushed her back onto the couch. With a swift gesture she tugged at the straps of her black gown and pulled them down over her rounded shoulders, baring her breasts to the golden light. Her skin was alabaster-smooth, the blue veins bright under the milky opalescence of her flesh. Deliberately Sergei traced the line where her shoulders melted into the full creamy swell of her breasts. She stirred under him, her hands tracing the proud muscles of his back, pressing his firm buttocks hungrily with her palms. He slipped his hand beneath her skirt, tugging the voile higher and higher over her thighs, feeling her legs part willingly, needfully, under his touch. His fingers traveled higher yet, coaxing her into deep, languid sighs. Moist, acquiescent under him, she writhed gently, her body undulating in a rhythm that became stronger and stronger, flowing into a cresting wave as he urged her on. He plunged into her, burying his hard manhood into her opened softness. He plunged again and again, with hard, sure strokes, until he heard her cry out and felt her smooth arms close around his neck, pulling him to her, folding him into the snowy whiteness of her body. At last, with a cry, he gave himself to her, lost in the warmth of her loins.





Darya left the library first, after carefully straightening her disheveled gown and smoothing her silk stockings. She patted her hair into place, stepped back into her slippers, and without a backward glance at Sergei Rogozhin, slipped through the door and vanished. Sergei watched her go with a very real feeling of gratitude. This had threatened to be a very dull evening until Darya appeared to put some sparkle in it. He had never loved the woman, nor she him, but they had a very frank appreciation of each other, and it had been a very pleasant surprise to find her here in St. Petersburg.

Another surprise, not quite as pleasant, waited for him just behind the heavy carved mahogany doors of the little library. Just as he pulled the door closed behind him and the lock clicked into place, he was distracted by an angry exclamation. "Oh!" someone spat in fury.

He whirled on his heel and came face to face with his cousin's fiancée.

Marina's violet eyes blazed hotly up at him. "You, you . . ." she sputtered angrily, but the words she needed to express her overwhelming rage would not come. Her hands clenched into fists, and for a moment Sergei fancied that she was going to

strike him. Her breasts heaved as she struggled for breath. She had been on her way upstairs to her room to fix her hair and apply more perfume before she sallied once again onto the dance floor. She had seen the tall, stately blond emerge from the library. And now Sergei Rogozhin! She knew what it meant. She saw the way they looked.

"Mademoiselle Lebedev," Sergei said in surprise. "I did not know you were here. How lovely to see you again," he finished lightly.

Marina was not moved by his banter. Her eyes glittered up at him, dark amethysts blazing out of her pale face.

"You are a disgusting man," she said coldly. "To do this, in Viktor's house, on the eve of my wedding, with all the guests here . . ."

In genuine surprise Sergei saw that she was really shocked. So, for all her womanly flaunting, Viktor's little bride was an innocent after all. Under the promising body and the heaving breasts beat the heart of a schoolgirl. He could see how shaken she was, and her virginal indignation would have been laughable had it not occurred to him that this spoiled, naive child was condemned to learn to love in Viktor Rogozhin's arms. Condemned by her own innocence, but condemned nonetheless. His gray eyes darkened thoughtfully as he looked down at her. Run, he wanted to say, run from this house or you will never know what love can be. Your beauty, your passion, will be wasted here. Go, before it is too late. All at once he wanted to gather her into his arms, hard, angry little face and all. He wanted to protect her from the horrors he knew must lie ahead. Viktor would ruin this beautiful child forever.

Marina misread his expression. He thinks I am stupid, she raged inwardly. He is laughing at me.

As quick as a snake, her hand shot out, and she slapped his cheek as hard as she could. "I hate you, I hate you," she half-sobbed, her eyes brimming with tears. "Go away. Get out."

Stunned, Sergei put his hand to his stinging cheek. He looked at her in disbelief. What was she thinking of? "Do you really want me to go?" he asked gently, and her reply was a passionate "Yes, yes, I want you to go. Go now." She struck him again, feeling her hand burn across his face with fierce pleasure.

Hot anger displaced earlier compassion. "You bitch, you will-

ful little bitch," Sergei muttered between clenched teeth. "I will go, but before I do, permit me to pay my respects."

Before she could move, he grasped her by the shoulders, folded her closely in his arms, crushed her against him. She felt the hard muscles of his chest under the rough cloth of his uniform. His lips grazed hers in a hot, ardent kiss, and she squirmed rebelliously, clawing, struggling to free herself from those arms of iron that only held her closer. His mouth pressed harder against hers, seeking, searching, parting her lips, and it was as if the breath had been knocked from her body under the force of a blow. Her head reeled and her heart fluttered wildly in her breast. A feeling she could not name swept over her, and the fight drained from her. Against her will, her mouth softened and her lips responded to his.

He let her go just as abruptly as he had swept her into his arms. She staggered backward, steadying herself as best she could, panting for breath. She felt inexplicably weak, and she was afraid she would faint. She saw something in his eyes she had never seen in the eyes of any man. She wanted to run from him, to tear herself away, but those gray, hard eyes held her like a butterfly impaled on a pin. He was despicable, vile.

"I hate you," she gasped breathlessly, and gathering all her strength, turned at last and fled up the stairs to her room.

Voroshilov's conversation with Von Eggeling had dispirited him more than he cared to admit, and now that he had fulfilled his social obligations by dancing with some of the ladies that fluttered admiringly around him, he longed to return to his apartments and put the noise and the glitter of the evening behind him. He felt a great desire to be alone, away from the chatter and banter of the party.

He felt inexplicably tired, and besides, there were no interesting new faces in the company gathered in Viktor Rogozhin's salons. Voroshilov knew them all, either in person or by reputation, and there was not one among them whose company made him want to stay. Although in the past he had allowed himself a few brief affairs with some of the women here, they had all proved disappointing. Neither the willful Nadja Korenskaya nor the languid, petulant Elizabeta Modloravna had succeeded in holding his interest past the moment of surrender. True, they were lovely women, but on closer inspection they were hardly

worth the bother of the surreptitious courtship, nor the risk of eventual discovery. How quickly the flame of his passion had waned under the storm of their demands. He had been moved to pity their cuckolded husbands far more than he had ever imagined possible.

At last Voroshilov caught sight of the count, and he moved through the crowd to make his obligatory farewells to Viktor Rogozhin. Excusing himself with punctilious courtesy, he wove his way past the dancers and the chaperons, past twittering girls, and past the groups of young men engaged in serious discussions, their young foreheads furrowed earnestly and their mouths pursed in concentration. Voroshilov sighed. He was so tired of talkers, of endless discussions which led to nothing.

At last he came to where Count Rogozhin stood, glass in hand, talking with a woman whom Voroshilov recognized but whose name escaped him for the present. She was talking very effusively about some subject which was apparently of great interest to her, and Voroshilov paused, waiting for her to take a breath so he could interrupt and make his adieus. Will she never be quiet, he thought, as the woman went on and on without pause.

It was then that he felt a light hand on his arm and turned in surprise. A pair of startling green eyes looked up at him. A strong, sensual mouth curved into a smile.

"My name is Darya Ivanovna Berenskaya," said a tall blond woman in a black dress.

She was the most beautiful creature Anton Voroshilov had ever seen.

## 10



Marina threw herself on her bed and gave herself over to the storm of tears. She sobbed helplessly, the memory of her humiliation burning through her like a firebrand. "I hate him," she moaned into the pillow, "I hate him, I hate him, I hate him." The hard, mocking eyes of Sergei Rogozhin were something she would never forget, and with all her heart she wished she had clawed them with her nails, had bitten his arrogant, hard mouth with her teeth, and made him scream. But no, he had held her too fast in his arms, he had crushed her to him, and then the force of an emotion that was new and frightening to her had made her melt against him, welcome the hard kisses he pressed upon her mouth. "I hate him," she raged, and pounded the pillow with her fist.

She did not hear the door open or the key turn in the lock. But suddenly she sensed another presence in the room, and she looked up.

It was Viktor. With a sigh of relief she pulled herself to a sitting position. "Oh, Viktor," she breathed thankfully, "I am so glad you are here. Viktor . . ." Her voice died in her throat as she saw the cold, hard rage in his eyes. His face was twisted into an evil, menacing mask, a caricature of the man she had known.

She gasped apprehensively. "Viktor . . ." she quavered, finding her voice at last.

"You filthy, filthy bitch," Viktor said very softly.

She looked back at him, her eyes wide, not understanding.

"You disgusting, ungrateful bitch." His voice was soft, poisonous. "First you make my guests wait, then you wear your mother's cameo to defy me in front of them." He took a deep, rasping breath, and she saw that his hands were clenched into fists and that his knuckles were very white. She shuddered, and all at once she felt very cold.

"You slut, you throw yourself at all the men. Don't deny it," he roared as she opened her mouth to protest. "I saw you, I saw you on the dance floor, and I saw you outside the library, in the arms of Sergei, clinging to him, draping yourself as close to his body as you could, like the little whore you are."

His eyes burned like hot coals in his livid face, and Marina suddenly thought: He is mad. He is going to kill me. Slowly, stealthily, she pulled herself up from the bed, and as soon as she was on her feet, she threw herself toward the door.

But quick despite his heavy bulk, Viktor anticipated her move. He intercepted her and caught her in his big, rough hands.

She wriggled, struggling feverishly against his strength.

"Let me go," she whimpered. "Viktor, you are hurting me." But he only held her harder, pinching the delicate, tender flesh of her arms with his thick fingers. "You bitch," he repeated over and over again, "you little bitch."

Marina braced herself, pulling away from him with all her might. But with one hand he grabbed her around the waist and held her in a viselike iron grip. With his other hand he tore at the delicate bodice of her silk-and-lace gown. The gossamer cloth gave under his hand, and Marina's breasts were naked under his hand. He rubbed his thick fingers over her bare skin. Marina screamed.

"Don't waste your strength, my dear," he whispered hoarsely. "No one will hear you, and besides, the door is locked."

But she could not stop the screams that rose in her throat.

Furiously she kicked, threw her weight against him, but she was no match for him, and she screamed in vain. She let herself go limp in his arms, and he lurched forward to keep his balance. Then she struggled to her feet.

His thick lips were on her throat, and she shuddered as he

touched her. His lips moved down over her naked breasts, and with a moan of horror she felt him tug at her skirt. The fabric tore with a soft sigh, and she felt his hand against her naked thigh.

No, no, this could not be happening to her. She gave a hard, desperate kick, then another. Somehow she managed to throw him slightly off balance, but that was all she needed. Behind her was the dresser, and on it the candlestick. Blindly she reached over her head and groped on the cluttered vanity. Her fingers closed around the narrow stem of the copper candleholder. Summoning all her strength, she lifted it into the air, swung it in a wide arc over her head, and struck directly ahead of her, with the full force of her body behind the blow. She struck once, twice, a third blow, followed by a fourth, a fifth . . . again and again and again, until her arm was exhausted and the candlestick dropped from her fingers.

She heard Viktor moan. His hand slowly released its grip, and he fell heavily to the floor.

Blood poured out of the side of his head where a large gash had cut through the flesh and into the bone. The cut ran from the back of his skull to the top of his ear, and even without bending down to listen for his breath, Marina knew that he was dead.

With fear-frozen fingers, Marina searched Viktor's pocket for the key. With a calm she did not know she possessed, she ran to the armoire and grabbed a dress from the hook. She slipped out of her torn gown and pulled the other dress over her shoulders. But though her mind was calm, her fingers trembled uncontrollably, and she struggled with the long row of buttons down the front of her gown. She would never be able to dress herself! They would come up and find her here—Victor's murderess standing over Viktor's body. Sweet Mother, help me, she moaned as she twisted the shell buttons with shaking fingers. There, at last she was done! She snatched a shawl from the back of a chair and threw it over her shoulders. Then she unlocked the door with Viktor's key and fled.



Waiting. Waiting for orders, waiting for money and supplies, waiting for night. Waiting to strike. Waiting, the ability to balance between despair and hope, Mikhail Zudin thought wryly. This is the backbone of the revolution, not the dogma, the flamboyant rhetoric, or the fiery idealism. How many dedicated men had fallen because their ideals and love of liberty cracked under the strain of the endless, empty hours of waiting? How many convictions eroded by time, how much strength sapped day by day as the old order continued unchanged? While so many waited. The men at the window smiled bitterly. The true strength of the revolutionary was patience.

Mikhail Stepanovich Zudin had learned the difficult art of patience well. He had seen too much to crack under the impotent rage that burned in him as the clock ticked the idle hours away. There would be an end. A victory to push the struggle forward along the inevitable road. He believed in it: he had nothing else left in which to believe.

Mikhail tapped the last few shreds of precious tobacco into his palm and carefully rolled himself a cigarette. He inhaled it with real pleasure. He was slim, fine-boned, just past the middle years of his twenties, though the hard lines around his mouth made him



look older. His hair was a light chestnut color, and in the sunlight that struggled through the grime-streaked window it turned golden. His eyes were deep-set and very blue, flecked with yellow sparks and fringed with long pale lashes that brushed against the lenses of his spectacles. His high cheekbones were set into relief by the thinness of his face. His mouth was sweetly boyish, the lips curved and generous; a mouth made for laughter, though the laughter had left him long ago.

Mikhail stared dispiritedly into the street. The people of Kiev scurried busily about their affairs, wrapped in layers of ill-assorted garments against the cold and the dreaded frostbite and chilblains.

A long line had formed in the street; people waiting since dawn in front of the baker's shop, ration cards in hand. Soon the daily distribution of hard loaves and the precious rolls of bread would begin. This had become a common sight since the outbreak of the war. Even daily necessities had become scarce. Bread, milk, flour, eggs, suddenly were precious commodities. Even the ration cards issued by the city officials to ensure equitable distribution of the scant supplies did not guarantee that there would be enough. All the available materials went first for the troops—a sure way to keep the ranks of the army up to full complement. What the army did not use reached the city markets, but as the fighting dragged on, the army needed more and more. Some on the line beneath Mikhail's window would be turned away empty-handed. The kerchiefed women and the shabbily dressed men would press their faces to the sooty glass window, begging for food.

Without bread, families would go to bed hungry yet again. War: gaunt faces and thin bodies under layers of shapeless woollens.

It was a good and prosperous time for the profiteers; in a city where the shops were stripped of their goods before noon, there was nothing that could not be had for the right price. It was an opportunist's paradise, jewels and furs offered for a pound of coffee or a scrap of bacon. Heirlooms sold to keep children fed. Gold glitters but does not fill the belly or keep out the cold; a treasured bracelet, a diamond cravat pin, earrings winking with faceted sapphires, would bring a loaf of precious white bread or a box of tea. For a gold watch a few kilos of potatoes or a pound

of butter. And other deals—an evening of pleasure in exchange for a pair of boots or a pound of sugar.

Those that would be saved waited for food, while those that would save them simply waited, Mikhail thought. The converts of Lenin and Karl Marx sat in their tiny rooms in obscure pensions on narrow streets all over Russia, waiting, as he was, for the orders to strike. Meanwhile, they watched the walls of their cold rooms glistening with moisture, cursed the bedbugs and cockroaches that infested the walls.

But it was worth it: the revolution that would end this world of exploitation that made hags of girls of twenty and febrile, broken men of youths in the prime of their lives, all so that the ruling class could live in comfort and ease. The time had come to deal the death blow to this structure of inequities.

Mikhail was thankful for his strength. It allowed him to force his mind from thoughts of the Okhrana, which at every minute threatened his life and the life of the revolution. Still, they haunted him. If the police should come, what then? He did not know. Could he incite the blue-clad officers to shoot him first, or would these efficiently cruel men take him alive? Could he withstand the beatings, the unbroken hours of relentless interrogation, without cracking? Would he have the strength in the glare of the naked light bulb to repeat the lies and half-truths he had memorized? Would he talk, would he be tricked into giving away information that would cost the lives of his comrades?

Yes, there were those who had been taken by the Okhrana, and tortured. Not everyone had broken. Lenin himself had undergone the ordeal. Was it true what he said: that the anticipation and fear were worse than the torture itself? Imagination builds and embroiders a reality as deeply terrifying as the most hellish tricks of the Okhrana. It is this fear that one must guard against. The more seasoned veterans of the movement used the simple trick of concentrating on seemingly trivial matters. They played cards, invented games of solitaire, worked out complicated maneuvers on the chessboard, memorized favorite poets and writers. They learned new languages and devised new codes for messages. And sometimes to block the future, their minds turned to the past, to those they loved and had left behind. They remembered long-lost joys and half-forgotten faces.

To Mikhail the Moscow of his childhood seemed now like a vivid painting: broad, sweeping avenues shadowed by rows of

trees, churches with curving golden cupolas, ornate, graceful buildings behind whose splendid facades were such shrines of mystery and awe as the Moscow Arts Theater and the quiet halls of the university, where his father taught. And the comfort, respect, and happiness of his home. It was not opulent, but it was spacious and warm, full of personal mementos, photographs, treasures brought from distant lands. Lush Oriental carpets covered the polished hardwood floors, and soft, deeply plush armchairs and sofas added to the atmosphere of ease and peace. There were plants in big painted ceramic pots, and flowers from the garden brightened many rooms throughout the year.

The house was a redolent interfusion of magical scents: the pervading sweet smell of the golden wax the maids used to polish the furniture and floors to a gleaming brilliance, the smell of thick Russian black bread and pastries wafting up from the kitchens; the smell of flowers—sweet, and elusive. The scent of perfume, a delicate blending of lavender and musk that breathed from the skin of his mother, Katya Alexandrovna; the pungent, rich aroma of the cigars Mikhail's father smoked after dinner in the quiet of his library.

In the wide, sunny kitchen, Mikhail and his brother, Pyotr, arrayed battalions of lead soldiers under the patient and loving eye of the old maidservant, Yelena Issipova. In her warm kitchen Mikhail fought and played with his quiet, intense older brother. The difference in their natures did not make the slightest matter to Yelena, who treated them both as rowdy princes. They were coddled, scolded, admired, and petted in turn: bounced on the knees of sturdy moujiks from the country, petted by pungent fishwives, and scolded by the neighborhood gossips. There was always a treat for them buried in the deep pocket of a ragged sheepskin coat or in the starched aprons of visiting women—a stick of sugarcane, a little bag of marbles, or a treasured coin.

But a shadow fell over Mikhail's childhood paradise. In the December of a harsh Moscow winter, Katya Alexandrovna died giving birth to a stillborn daughter. Mikhail curled himself beneath the staircase and listened to the weeping of the servants and the pacing of his father's steps in the now-empty house.

Without Katya by his side, Stephan Fyodorovitch cut himself off from every human emotion and fled into the world of his work. He spent longer and longer hours away from his home. His love for his sons became a truncated, difficult version of

what he had once expressed so freely. He followed their studies, inquiring with vague gentleness of their progress, their interests, their health. But the small trials and joys of their boyhood slipped beyond him; in the cloud of his own grief he lacked the resources to draw his sons to him, and he became more distant and increasingly removed from their lives.

The two boys, so different, were left under the care of Yelena. Bound only by their common memories, Mikhail and Pyotr bent to their own natures. Yelena watched the gulf between the two children widen, helpless to stop it, unable to even say if it was just, or yet one more terrible penance that they would have to pay.

But brothers who are strangers are still bound by the mysteries of blood. They grew apart, and yet they traveled down the same path, to the same end. It was an end that was to be their fate, and the fate of all of Russia.



At the university, Pyotr was praised for his brilliance. Yet if his arguments in the classroom brought him accolades, his more impassioned speeches among those of equally radical and boldly insurrectionary politics caused dismay to his professors and those others who feared for him. The dark, taciturn young man became part of the coterie of young intellectuals who passed the hours in lengthy, passionate discussion of world politics and economic theories, blind to the longing looks of the female students. Their only passion was for politics.

Pyotr had already been deeply involved in what was known simply as "the movement" when Mikhail followed him to the university. It took but a few months for it to become evident that in acquiring the younger son of Professor Zudin, the university had added to its ranks not a scholar, but a buoyant, merry poet. Although the professors shook their heads over Mikhail's academic efforts, even they were forced to admit that his charm and wit were more than enough to compensate for his inability to retain dry facts and dusty theorems.

As time passed, Pyotr and Mikhail became strangers. For his taste, Mikhail found his older brother too serious, too contemplative, and with the true instinct of an iconoclast, Mikhail delighted

in satirizing the well-developed political tenets and convictions of Pyotr. Pyotr listened quietly, smiling mildly at Mikhail's jibes. He never forced Mikhail to understand what he, Pyotr, did or felt. He knew too well that his younger brother found him and his friends self-important and dull with their endless discussions of social and economic inequities. Pyotr knew that it must sound dreary indeed compared to his brother's lighthearted literary debates and the whimsical scribbles he dedicated to pretty female students. Mikhail's awakening would come when he was ready.

But that awakening was to cost Pyotr everything. In January of 1908, five days after the new year, the Okhrana burst into the lecture hall of the university. They pushed the other students aside with the butts of their rifles and dragged Pyotr into the snowy streets. They handcuffed him and threw him bodily into a waiting lorry. Within seconds the lorry had disappeared without a trace.

Pyotr languished in prison for two months before the authorities acknowledged that he had been arrested. They refused to state the charge, and did not allow Mikhail to see him. Stephan Zudin receded into a world where this new sorrow could not touch him. He forgot the present and its harsh realities; he lived in the past, in the happy distant time when his sons were children and his wife was by his side. "Let us go home," he said on one occasion when Mikhail had taken him to wait for long hours in the anteroom of a legislator's office, staring at the flyspecked wallpaper. "It is getting late, your mother will be wondering where we are."

So it was Mikhail, of the carefree, laughing spirit, who faced the implacable, unyielding authorities. "Where is my brother?" he begged. "What has he done?" "What do you want us to do? We will do anything you want." But he pleaded to no avail. The answer was always the same. "I am so sorry . . ." An expressive shrug of the shoulders, the hands spread helplessly. Life is hard for all of us. And slowly the passionate rage that had fueled his brother's work against the state became born in Mikhail as he fought for Pyotr's freedom.

At last Mikhail was called to the prison. A charge had been brought against Pyotr: conspiracy against the imperial government. The trial was held without lawyers, without witnesses, the sentence pronounced. Death. A firing squad at dawn.

Pyotr was buried in the small churchyard beside his mother.

Standing over the rough pine casket that hid the broken corpse of his brother, Mikhail felt the hatred sear through his veins, and every fiber of his being cried out for vengeance. Rage blazed fiercely through him, and at that moment, what remained of the joy and complacency of his nature fell away forever. Pyotr's cadaver bore mute and irrefutable testimony to what was possible in Russia. Here was proof of the horror that lurked behind the smugly decorous facade of Russia.

He made a vow over the coffin of his brother: I, Mikhail Zudin, will give my all to the fight that remains before us. The machine of the Okhrana must be broken; the government that sentenced my brother must be destroyed, the palaces leveled. As long as there is breath in my body, I will fight them. I will see this evil blotted from this land.

Mikhail left his father in Yelena's care and took a small room under a false name. Hour after hour he pored over volumes of political thought. With newfound passion he discovered the works of Marx and studied the letters of the exiled Lenin. Quietly he took his brother's place in the small, dank cellars where new dreams were spoken of in whispered voices. He learned the trade of the revolutionary with the ardent determination of the converted reaching out for a new god, and soon he outstripped even the most educated of his comrades. He learned to write incendiary pamphlets, to smuggle information, to build explosives, and to use a gun.

He became a leader. His enemy was intangible, menacing, and deadly.

Though he longed for action, he knew that work must be done before they could strike. He learned patience. From his hiding place he wrote inflammatory leaflets decrying the abuses of the czarist regime and advocating the brotherhood of the workers and gave speeches on street corners. He worked ceaselessly, sparing neither himself nor his followers, not allowing himself to wonder how long before the Okhrana arrested him. He knew that it was only a matter of time.

He learned to make himself anonymous in the street, to keep his head low and not call attention to himself. His instincts became sharp, the instincts of a stalked animal. He could not be followed. Sensing pursuers, he would hide in shadowy doorways, later taking a circuitous route to elude the men that stalked him. He discovered which of the merchants were sympathetic to the

cause. He became adept at slipping through shops, vanishing by the back door while the man on his trail waited for him in the street. He slept in empty cellars and packed his boots with old newspapers against the cold. Hunger was his constant companion and fear part of him. But hatred and lust for revenge kept him going, and the hardships meant nothing to him. He welcomed each new sacrifice that must be made. When the Okhrana came, he must know that he had done all in his power to further the cause against the blue-clad police.

They came. Ferocious pounding broke him from sleep, pick-axes swung at the door, and the hard-faced men burst in. Not now, he thought desperately. Not yet. I have just begun!

Like death, the Okhrana does not yield what she has taken. He now learned firsthand of the prisons of Russia, and saw the world as Pyotr must have known it. Had Pyotr broken? Had he screamed for mercy under the vicious torture? Had he begged them for mercy, crying out that he would talk if only they would let him sleep? Mikhail knew that he would die under a vow of silence. He longed for death as a man longs for a mistress. He prayed for his agony to end with the crack of rifles. Yet for now they seemed content to hammer at him with their questions and their lies.

"Who? Give me the names of the men who worked with you, and you can go." The faceless inquisitor reappeared again and again. "Where did you meet? How many were there? What were their names? Tell me, you fool. Do you think they would die for you? Talk, and the beatings will stop. All this will be over. You will eat good food again, you will sleep in a warm bed. Speak, and we will take the chains off and let you wash. You can leave today, if you talk. You can go back to your home, back to your sweetheart, back to your friends. Tell me what I want to know."

He screamed when they broke his leg. The bone snapped, and the pain flooded through him. He heard his own voice screaming endlessly. But still he did not talk. The pain throbbed mercilessly through his leg, but he did not give in. It was not a matter of courage; it was a matter of endurance; the beatings, the tortures, the endless interrogations took on a rhythm, a life of their own, separate from his. He became a spectator of his own suffering. Perhaps, he would say to himself, I can endure this just another day, another hour. One more time. Then it will end. Then I can go free.



Their tactic changed. Without explanation they consigned him to solitary confinement. Once each day a tasteless thin gruel that smelled of fetid water was passed to him as his food. There was no light, no sound. Nothing existed for him but the throbbing pain from his leg—and the knowledge that no matter what they might do, he must not break.

They were not fools, these men of the Okhrana. At last the cell door opened, and Mikhail stepped out, a gray-faced, living cadaver with a matted and filthy beard and lice crawling on his skin.

Once more he sat before his heavy-jowled interrogator.

"Your father is dead, Zudin. There is no one on the outside who can help you. No one cares whether you live or die. Tell us the names of your cell, who carried messages; give us addresses, tell us what you remember. Your father is dead. We will let you cry on his grave."

Fury and icy malevolence filled the voice now: "I could kill you now, Zudin, but death is an escape, it is too easy." The man called the guard. "I am tired of this one. He wants to die. Let him do it slowly. There is a column for Irkutsk leaving tomorrow."

Irkutsk. Siberia. Exile, and a certain death, but an unwavering hope that flamed now even in the moment of the dreaded sentence from which few returned. Head shaved grotesquely, legs fettered with ankle bands linked together by ten pounds of chain caught up in a rope around his waist so that he could walk, he and a hundred others began the slow, killing journey by foot to the distant city of death.

Mikhail's heart lifted as the long column set out. It was almost death, but not yet the open grave. Others had disappeared into the wastes of Siberia before, and returned to the struggle. He would come back. He would finish the work he had begun.

One hundred and thirty-five prisoners had begun the journey from Moscow nine months before; only twenty-three survived. Typhoid, pneumonia, and dysentery had taken their toll. Starvation and summary executions by the guards had thinned the ranks even further. The remaining twenty-three were but a line of living corpses, indistinguishable from one another. But Mikhail was alive. "As long as there is breath in my body . . ."

Irkutsk was a young, raw city, brawling, rough, ungraceful,

an unorthodox union of mansions and shanties married without thought to order or grace. The progeny of this mixture was a ramshackle, startling city, half slums, half riches. The streets were unpaved, and the people walked over simple footpaths of slick ice during the winter and muddy trails in the rainy months. The few women of the town picked up their skirts and held them high above the ground in a fastidious effort to keep their hems from being coated with dirt. It was a brave but futile gesture, for it was nearly impossible not to be splashed by the passing carts that churned up the mud with their wheels and sent it flying in high, wide arcs. At night the streets were guarded by mastiffs that were turned out after dark to prowl the alleyways. They were as dangerous as wolves, and often as hungry. It took an intrepid and well-armed man to walk the streets of Irkutsk alone at night.

It was a city of exiles. Here the outcasts of the czar had built a refuge for themselves and their own kind. Lacking the charm of St. Petersburg or the dignity of Moscow, it pulsed under the vitality of a thousand men who had been given one meager chance. In this city of prisoners there were no true fetters, no chains that could prevent a man from becoming whatever he wished. But Irkutsk would be the boundary of his world. Within her limits he must live his life, as low or as grand as it would be.

Here one might perish in a landslide in the iron and silver mines to which all new prisoners were sent to toil, or the end might come under the beatings of the guards, who were free to vent their own sadistic tendencies upon the bodies of the convicted. A stubborn will to live was the first and only requirement of survival in Siberia—with that a man could do anything.

Standing in silent, resplendent testimony to this were the lavish mansions with marquetry floors and splendid lusters that stood next to rows of dark shanties where as many as a dozen newly arrived prisoners were thrust in the midst of winter with a small coal stove for their only heat. Killings and bribery had taken the owners of the mansions out of the mines, their fortunes now made on the labor of others. These new potentates, reigning over a hellish world to which they were forever bound, lived in palaces with appointments of Oriental furniture, rare paintings, libraries that rivaled those in the richest homes of St. Petersburg. Wives and daughters of wealthy exiles had even installed conservatories, defying the natural laws of this harsh and

unfriendly climate. Behind the thick glass flourished palms, lemon trees, and rare orchids. Elegant ballrooms, silken drapes billowing at the windows, grand pianos that had been shipped overland at an extravagant expense—nothing in these houses hinted that they had been built by exiles, enemies of the state, men whose lives would be lived out in the shadow of these cold mountains.

Mikhail realized the trap from his first day, and resolved that his energies would not be given to creating a world within the prison city known as Irkutsk, but that he would never cease to strive for his one chance to escape. There were no walls here, only the thousands of miles of mountains and endless vast plains in which a man might go mad, and be lost forever.

He was assigned to the coal mines. Chained to the man ahead of him, he swung the small pick into the dark seam of coal. They descended into the subterranean darkness before dawn, returning long after dark. Life seemed to exist only in the low-roofed tunnels that twisted through the bowels of the earth, the world nothing more than a pointless scratching at the unyielding black rock. They burrowed their way through the mine like moles, a living sacrifice to imperial Russia.

And always, they were guarded.

Mikhail lived with the dream of escape. But the months passed; he felt his strength ebb, sapped by the unending toil. The days passed. Soon he had been in the city of exiles a year, and he began to despair.

He was not alone. The man in the bunk below him found a way of escape. He soaked wooden matches in a cup of water, and when it was impregnated with the poisonous sulfur, he drank it. In the morning, he was past the oaths of the guards who dragged his body from the bunk. Mikhail watched them throw the corpse into the yard. Is this the only way out, then? he thought bitterly.

"You, there. Get moving," the guard shouted, and Mikhail moved out of the yard with the others. They stood around the mouth of the shaft, waiting to descend into the darkness. The sky was gray and cold; a drizzle rained down on them. The guard gave the order to descend, and the prisoners moved forward. But as the first man set his foot on the ladder, there was a low roar and dynamite exploded through the mine. The earth beneath them trembled violently. All was in an uproar—the file of bewildered prisoners pushed together by the shouting guards. The

wooden shack at the mouth of the shaft was torn out of the ground. Jagged splinters sailed through the air. A soldier's horse whinnied in fright, a guard cursed. The prisoners began to scream, elated and horrified by the spectacle. They tried to move away, but the leather strap that bound them together made it impossible to run. In panic the prisoners pushed and pulled. The air was full of shouts. A rock shard hit a soldier's horse on the flank, and the animal fell, taking his rider with him.

A hand came down upon Mikhail's shoulder. He turned to see the flash of cold steel. Someone was hacking away at the leather leash that bound the prisoners in line. Mikhail was free.



When night fell over the poor trading quarter of Podol, Mikhail Zudin left his room. He quickly reached the Alexandrovskaya Square. He saw groups of blank-eyed men and huddled figures whose only protection against the chill night was their frayed rags. In the center of the square sat an immense, squat building, the House of Contracts, where stupefying sums of money changed hands during the sugar mart. Mikhail had pleaded with his two comrades that their bombs strike first at this temple to wealth and power, but he had been dissuaded. If there were to be accidental deaths, they must not come from the working class—the Podol was off limits.

The tram to the railway station on the western border of the city was old but warm. Mikhail paid the eleven-kopec fare and took his seat. He stared through the dirty window and gave himself up to his thoughts. For the hundredth time his mind turned to his two comrades.

He had met them both the night of his arrival in Kiev. The first, Andrei Massov, was a short, thickset man in his middle years. Thick graying hair clung around his face in tendrils, and his face was almost cherubically round, with clear and innocent eyes. His manner was detached and calm—perfect for his work.

Andrei had spent long years working with the imperial railroads; he was an expert line bomber, a trade he had learned in the service of the czar. He had planned vast sections of the track bed of the trans-Siberian railroad, traveled with gangs of laborers, hewing trees and leveling the earth side by side with them. He had worked the frozen soil of the tundra and the rugged mountainous reaches of Manchuria. He could determine to the last grain of precious powder how much dynamite was required to demolish anything from a palace to a bridge; he knew where to place the charges for maximum effectiveness, and exactly how much time should elapse between the separate explosions.

The tram shuddered slightly on the narrow gauge of the rails, slowed to a stop, and then, with its bell clanging, started up again. Mikhail looked up to see that they had passed the blood-red edifice of the Vladimir University. He went back to his thoughts. What was it that had turned Andrei against the government? How strong were his ideals? How fervent were his anger and his faith? Andrei had been cleared and was trusted by others, but Mikhail could not keep from wondering why this man, so successful in the service of the czar, had turned to the revolution.

Mikhail's second man was Andrei's physical opposite. Ivan Tilik was tall, a reed of a man with a long, bony head that reminded one of a horse. Indeed, his body bore out that impression, for he carried himself with a loping gait. His black hair hung coarse and lank, and behind his steel-rimmed spectacles his eyes burned with such intensity that strangers shied away from him. The hands that hung below the grime-soiled sleeves of his coat were constantly clenching and unclenching in a nervous tic, and his bloodless lips moved in a silent monologue.

If Mikhail passed easily as a student, and Andrei as a poor but respectable tradesman, Ivan was the picture of the madman or the beggar. Yet he had a genius for explosives. His forte was the invention and building of timing devices. Mikhail had heard his name whispered in awe among the radical students of Moscow. Now that he had witnessed Ivan's work at first hand, he marveled at the destructive skill that Tilik possessed. Ivan could improvise, from the most common articles, mechanisms to trigger an explosion with split-second precision. It was said that he had once built a bomb timed to detonate six weeks after it was set.

The men who had planted it in the officers' lounge of the St. Petersburg Seventeenth Army Corps read of the explosion in a London newspaper, and that night they had celebrated their triumph in Piccadilly. Apocryphal or not, the tale paid just tribute to Ivan.

But the tall man was as volatile as his weapons. Mikhail would have to hold him in check tonight lest his unpredictable temper betray them. Mikhail had seen him pull a knife at the slightest provocation, and he suspected that the time Ivan had spent in the czar's prisons was for murder.

At the railway station, Mikhail threaded his way quickly through the crowds. Soon he was walking along a dark and deserted boulevard. He was headed for a vast, unguarded estate on the outskirts of the city. It was headquarters of Mikhail and his two companions.

They always met at night, each man traveling alone from his lodgings in various quarters of the city. If one was followed, he was to lead his pursuers away from the estate. It was prearranged that if one of them failed to arrive, the others were to wait no more than an hour. They were to leave and wait for him in a small café on the Kreshtchatik near the Bogdan Khmelnitzki Square.

Mikhail hurried down the last stretch of road and let himself into the dark house. He walked quietly through the luxuriously carpeted halls and down the stairs to the basement. The glow of candlelight told him that the others were already there.

Tilik's long form lurked in the doorway that opened into the cellar rooms. "You're late," he said accusingly. "And Massov has not come either. He has a shorter way to come than either of us."

Mikhail shrugged. "He'll be here," he said. "He knows it's important." If they started to jump at shadows, their work tonight would be doomed from the start. Andrei was probably quite safe, and they could not allow themselves the comfort of panic.

In the shadowed darkness, Ivan's eyes were black pools in his gaunt face. Mikhail could feel the fear of the man. He brushed past Ivan into the room that served as their laboratory. "We can check our supplies one last time while we wait for Andrei."

It was ironic that these three men should meet in an abandoned mansion, built to delight the opulent fantasies of its rich owner. It was Mikhail who had decided that the elegant house

should be their headquarters, for it was ideally suited to their purposes.

It was far from the hustle of the busy streets. Their frequent comings and goings would not be noticed and reported to the police. It had been built by a wealthy merchant at the outbreak of the war, but he had long since repaired to the safety of St. Petersburg and boarded up the windows and bolted the doors. The house was empty and dark behind its high walls, the servants and the caretakers dismissed—a luxurious bourgeois contrivance marvelously suited to the needs of the revolution, with its thick walls, its cellar of stone, its subcellar with walls as dense as the battlements of a medieval dungeon. The subcellar in happier days had served to keep the wooden racks of wine, but now its walls glistened with moisture and the place smelled of dankness and mice. It was a perfect hiding place, small rooms spilling endlessly into one another, tiny dead-end cubicles carved into the walls. The police would be hard put to trap them here, especially in the dark. By the time the Okhrana made its way through the convoluted corridors of the cellars, Mikhail and his two comrades would be gone.

A better explosives laboratory could not have been designed by Ivan himself—here he could experiment to his heart's content, varying the amounts of active substance in the explosives. If one batch proved too volatile, the house would not crumble around their ears or bring suspicious neighbors running to their windows. The only problem was the dampness. The powder must be kept dry. Mikhail carefully wrapped the stores in a double layer of oilskin before pushing them back into a crevice in the wall, behind some loosened bricks.

The room in which Ivan and Mikhail worked was organized with careful precision. On a table improvised from a door and stacks of bricks, they delicately laid out the articles they needed: springs, a small copper scale, bits and pieces of wire, nuts, bolts, and the assorted hardware necessary to the building of timing devices—inner mechanisms of old clocks and cheap pocket watches Ivan had brought at the pawnbrokers'. Ivan wore a heavy leather apron he had found in the stable behind the house. A small kerosene lamp sputtered fitfully in the gloom, filling the damp air with smoke.

Tonight they met to review their final plans for the Alexeyev



military-munitions plant, ten kilometers to the north of the city. Their instructions had come nearly a month ago.

The Alexeyev works were to be totally destroyed—the main building razed, the manufacture of weapons made impossible. Alexeyev would not be able to fulfill the terms of his new contract with the czar's Military Bureau. "It is mandatory" the message read in the doctrinal style that marked even the most terse of communiqués, "that the fabrication of weapons whose function is to arm the workers of one nation against the workers of another be halted. The peddlers of death must be stopped, the workers must be freed from the tyranny of private and imperial interests. . . . Long live the revolution."

For a month Andrei, Ivan, and Mikhail studied the Alexeyev factories. They learned where the forges and the molding rooms were situated, the thickness of the walls, which buildings were connected by underground corridors and which stood separately. Mikhail memorized the schedules of the guards and learned the names of those on night duty. He knew the signals by which they identified themselves. Andrei entered the factory as a day laborer. He learned the layout of the buildings from the inside. Together they had made a map of the foundries that would have done credit to the architect himself. Here the raw materials were broken down into usable metals; there they were tempered into the required weights and densities; farther on, the marriage of the ingredients took place. They knew where the different parts of the guns were poured and where they were assembled, and most important, Andrei had discovered the vast subterranean store-rooms where the carbines were packed in crates and readied for shipment. Carefully he reckoned the thickness of the walls, the denseness of the floors under his feet, and the height of the ceilings.

Ivan and Mikhail labored untiringly, building the timers and carefully grading the quantities of raw dynamite according to Andrei's descriptions of the factory.

Now they checked their supplies one last time. At midnight, they would enter the factory with the changing of the guard. By tomorrow morning the newspapers would report a mysterious and terrifying act of vandalism on the Alexeyev foundries.

The time ticked slowly by, and Andrei did not come. Ivan and Mikhail sat waiting; they had checked the supplies twice, purposely taking more time than they needed to fill the empty time

and stay the gnawing worry that moved in on them as Andrei failed to appear. Mikhail could feel his nerves tighten. He busied himself with the trivial chore of making cups of tea over the kerosene stove. Had Ivan been right after all? Had Andrei fallen into the hands of the Okhrana? What had they done to him? Had they made him talk? What had he said? Mikhail shuddered. We don't even know if he is still alive, he thought. If he does not come, we must go alone—these plans must not run aground, not now when they were so close to the accomplishment of everything they had worked for. "Ivan, listen to me . . ." "Shh." The big man put his finger to his lips.

Mikhail heard the steady tread on the stairs. Andrei! The two men in the cellar heaved a deep sigh of relief. But when they saw Andrei's face, they knew they were in danger. Andrei dropped wearily into a chair. "As I came through the gates, I got the feeling that I was being observed, so I hid in the tangle of overgrown bushes by the side of the house and waited. I saw you both go by, and I let you walk past me. I covered you with my revolver."

"And then . . ." Ivan urged him.

Andrei shrugged his shoulders. "I left the hedge and crept into the house. I went through the rooms upstairs. I saw with my own eyes they are empty, but even now I feel that someone is here, in this house. Upstairs."

Ivan laughed nervously. "You are jumpy tonight, Andrei. You sound like an old woman."

"An old woman, eh? Look." Andrei pulled a scrap of blue woolen cloth from his pocket. "I found this caught on the boards across the library windows. They are loose. They have been pried open."

Mikhail was on his feet, his hand reaching for his gun.

"I am certain we have a visitor," Andrei said.

"I'll go." Mikhail waved the two others back. "If anything happens to me, take what you need and go to the factory. The Alexeyev works must go up tonight, as we planned."

Upstairs, the doorway of the library was framed with stout strips of polished wood which concealed a pair of sliding doors. They were half-open. Mikhail strained his eyes in the darkness and listened. He cursed the blackness. Nothing. Suddenly he felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. A dry crackle in the darkness, a raspy sound—someone striking a match. A sound of fumbling.

Mikhail threw himself in the direction of the sound just as a small orange-and-blue flame burst into life.

The flame flickered and went out. There was a moan of surprise. A flash of pain shot through Mikhail's hand as sharp teeth sank into his flesh. He muffled a shout and shook his arm free, reaching with his other hand to his assailant's head. With the side of his open palm he hit his foe a hard blow at the base of the neck.

His shadowy enemy went limp. Mikhail sucked the air back into his lungs and hoisted the unconscious body to its feet and slung it over his shoulder.

"A woman!" Ivan's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are there women in the Okhrana?"

"Don't be a fool," Andrei replied. "Look how thin she is. Do you suppose the czar's police are wearing rags for uniforms these days, out of deference to the shortages, perhaps?"

"One can never tell," Ivan muttered. "We don't know who she is or what she was doing here. I say break her neck and have done with it."

"Quiet!" Mikhail said. "Look, she is waking up. Let's find out who she is."

The girl sighed deeply; her eyelids fluttered. Her heart-shaped face was very pale, her skin ivory-white against the tumble of dark curls that framed her face. She opened her eyes. They were the color of amethysts.

"My God," Ivan said breathlessly. "It's Marina Lebedev, the girl the police are after. Her picture is in all the newspapers, and they have probably followed her here."

Mikhail cursed silently. Ivan was right. He should have broken her neck and left her in the dark, before he saw her face, before he saw that instead of a man, his assailant was a fragile girl. A girl wanted by the Okhrana. Posters for her arrest littered the countryside and were distributed in all the villages. She was poison. He should wring her neck and be done with it. But not now. Later, when there was time. For the moment, she would have to go with them.

"We will take her with us," he said firmly. He saw the look of surprise in Ivan's eyes, but the tall man kept silent.

Mikhail leaned over the girl. "We know who you are, my dear Countess. Ivan, here, is going to tie your hands and gag you. You

will not scream. You will not moan or make a nuisance of yourself. You will do exactly as you are told, or we will tie your ankles together and drop you off on the steps of police headquarters. I am sure they will be very happy to see you."

She shrank back from him, and he saw how pale and skinny she was. She reminded him of a starved cat, and all of a sudden he was angry at himself for his harsh words. Damn her, he cursed silently. He held her firmly while Ivan stuffed a dirty cloth into her mouth and tied her hands. Then, with a brusqueness he had not planned, he pushed Marina roughly up the cellar stairs and into the darkness.

The guards at the Alexeyev munitions factory were careless and cooperative, not bothering to check Mikhail's identification against the description in their files. The night watch was a dull shift, and they were grateful for a distraction. They welcomed the new guard and showed him to his quarters. In the guardroom they offered him a cup of tea, which he declined, and a swig of vodka, which he accepted.

When he downed his glass, he pointed his revolver at their chests, ordering them to drop their weapons. They complied without a word of protest, each man mentally weighing the Alexeyev foundries and his own life in the balance. With spontaneous unanimity they came to the conclusion that the kopecks of Alexeyev were less valuable than their own skins.

The flame of a match in the guardroom window brought his coconspirators from the darkness without. Between them, shoulders shaking with fear, was the fugitive girl who had become their unwilling charge.

Andrei and Ivan then tied the girl to a chair inside the guardroom, where Mikhail could watch her. She sat very still, hardly breathing, her violet eyes filled with mute terror. Andrei and Ivan vanished into the factory with the bombs. It was eleven past one when they returned, with two and a half minutes to spare on their anticipated schedule.

Mikhail pointed to a length of stout rope. "You, Andrei, tie them up."

While Mikhail held the gun on the guards, Andrei lashed their wrists together, pulling the ropes tight. Then he began to stuff the guards' own handkerchiefs into their mouths.

"Fools," Andrei said, "you spend your life working for a pig

like Alexeyev, so that he can make guns for the Russian workers to shoot down the German workers and the Austrian workers. For brother to kill brother, while he and his kind get richer with every bullet that is fired. Don't you understand?"

"Stinking saboteur," one of the guards muttered. Andrei smiled and shrugged his thick shoulders as he gagged the guard. "One day you will come to your senses," he said. "Pray that it will not be too late."

"Quiet," Mikhail ordered.

A dull roar shook the building and set the walls trembling. All the men in the room strained to listen, and the girl closed her eyes. Her thin body shook like a leaf, and she was sweating with fear.

"It's the one under the pouring basin," Ivan said reverently. "Did you hear the low sound it made? That means most of the charge has been absorbed by the basin itself—not diffused into the surrounding area. Good, very, very good." His face was alight with excitement. There was another low roll of thunder and a flash of light. The building rocked on its foundations as the powder shed was blown into a dust of gray fragments. A third bomb exploded, followed by another and another as the minutely calculated timing devices released their springs. The air was filled with the roar of the dynamite. Mikhail, Andrei, and Ivan listened to the basso profundo cries of the edifice being torn asunder with a rapt expression.

"To hell with Alexeyev," Ivan crowed softly.

In the abandoned barn where they had taken shelter, Marina awakened with a start as Mikhail tucked his coat around her. Trembling, she sank back onto the thin straw that littered the floor.

She cringed as his hands touched her.

But Mikhail did not see her fear; he saw only her revulsion, this woman whose life he had spared against the wishes of Ivan and Andrei, this creature for whose sake they had slowed the pace of the journey and endangered their lives. And now this girl, this spoiled darling, shrank from his touch. Was she afraid her fine, aristocratic flesh would bleed under his coarse hands?

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he was angry. Rage burned through him.

"No need to continue the fine airs, Marina," he said roughly. "I know who you are. Look." He pulled a folded, tattered paper from his pocket. "A warrant for your arrest. It is in all the towns and villages in Russia everywhere. One day the Okhrana will find you, and all your airs will not help you then."

Marina's eyes gaped wide. She stared at him incredulously.

"A common criminal, my fine lady," Mikhail said softly. "Here, see for yourself: 'Murderess of Count Viktor Rogozhin. Last sighted in the vicinity of Kursk, reported again in Charkow. Thought to be traveling south. A large reward is offered by the bereaved family of Count Rogozhin for information regarding this woman.' Interesting, Countess." Mikhail folded the paper and pushed it back into his pocket.

"So much for your airs," he said. "You're only a murderess after all."

"No!" Marina shrank from him. "It was not like that . . ."

Mikhail touched her hand and she shuddered.

"You little bitch . . ." he began, but his voice faded. She was crying. The tears streamed down her face, making a path along her thin cheeks. He had wanted to hurt her, but the sight of her weeping overwhelmed him.

"Marina, don't . . ." He touched her arm, but she pulled away.

"Don't touch me!" Marina cried. Her hand clenched into a fist and she struck him on the mouth.

Mikhail's head jerked back under the force of the blow. "Whore!" Before he could stop himself, he was shaking her by her thin shoulders.

Marina went limp.

"Look at me, stupid little fool," Mikhail ordered savagely. He raised her head and looked into her eyes. Violet lights danced on the amethyst between her thick wet lashes. His eyes burned angrily over her. "Too good for the likes of me, are you?"

Marina whimpered in fear.

"Bitch!" Mikhail cursed. Yes, she was beautiful, even under the torn rags she wore. The sensuality of her mouth, the pure, sweet lines of her face that tore at his heart.

He wanted her, this rich man's woman, and he hated her for it.

Now anger spurred him on. He touched her cheek roughly with his hand, hurting the soft skin.

"No!" Marina moaned, but Mikhail did not hear. His hands slipped down her back, following the gentle curve where her buttocks swelled beneath the rough wool of her skirt. His hands found the swelling roundness of her breasts; he felt her tremble under him.

She screamed as he plunged into her, but she was helpless against the raging torrent of his need.

Later, when at last he pulled away from her, Marina covered her face with her hands and wept hoarsely. In the sound of her weeping was all the misery and destitution of her soul. Suddenly Mikhail saw her fear, and he was overcome with remorse.

"My God," Mikhail whispered. His hand crept to her shaking shoulder and his arms closed around her. Ashamed of what he had done, he held the sobbing girl. "Poor little girl," he murmured gently. "Will you ever forgive me?"



Nothing remained to tie Marina to her past. War and the murderous deed of her own hand conspired to push her into the cold and uncertain future. In the harsh, uncompromising glare of this new order, the gay, sophisticated world of St. Petersburg seemed far away. It shimmered soft and shadowy as though a veil had been dropped between that time and the present. St. Petersburg became a shadow landscape, a bitter memory that haunted Marina in her sleep.

Oh, Mama, Marina thought sadly, I was willing to risk anything to revenge you. As Viktor's wife, I would have made those cruel people pay. I would have humiliated them and made them suffer. How I still long to hear them say, "Your mother was a great artist and a great woman—we did not know it because we were petty and ignorant, and we are ashamed."

As for Viktor, very little clear memory remained of this man who could have done so much for her. Poor Viktor. Dead Viktor. She had become his executioner, not his countess. He had changed her life, but not in the way he had promised. She would be the bride of the gallows if they found her.

How delighted they must be in St. Petersburg. She could hear them now, she could see them, clustered together wearing the to-



ken black of mourning for a man they had never really glimpsed, their affected grief for him more than amply outweighed by the delicious circumstances which had led to his death. They would blame her blood, those delicate, respectable St. Petersburg folk. "The fruit never falls far from the tree. . . ."

"It was to be expected, my dear. Oh, poor Viktor . . ." Eyes dropped to hide the glint of delight, teacup poised to mask the smile that tugged at one's lip. "He could have had my Anushka, but instead he chose that guttersnipe. He got what he deserved."

"You're being very hard, Irena, but I daresay you're right. One lies down with dogs, one gets up with fleas."

"What will happen when the police get her? When they finally smoke her out from wherever she is? I understand that Anton Voroshilov himself is supervising the investigation."

"Then they will find her, you may rest assured! When they do, you may be certain that she will not get off lightly. Her airs will do her little good. For myself, I hope she gets what she deserves. That she is paid in kind, as it were."

"Some more tea, don't go just yet. I have heard that when the police take a woman . . . you know . . ."

"Yes, horrible tales they tell. But in this case, the girl should be quite pleased. Did you see her throw herself at the men she danced with? Making eyes at them and snuggling closer and closer in the most shameless way. Even if the police do not treat her with the greatest care . . . well . . ." A shrug of the fleshy shoulders under the crepe foulard.

"I agree with you, my dear. It's terrible, of course. For women like you and me, it would be tantamount to execution. But for a slut like that, it's better than she should get. I simply can't feel anything for the girl. You know that it is not my nature to be cruel . . . but she deserves whatever the Okhrana does to her."

But that was the past. The future was here, with Mikhail. The world through which she had stumbled so blindly until now ceased to be an incidental factor in her life. Her eyes lost their unseeing expression: she saw the frozen desolation of the country through which they fled, she felt the cold biting at her through every step of the journey. She was conscious of her body shivering under her coat and her thin woolen shawl. She saw the cracked fields, the houses buried underneath the snow, the thin straggly trees straining toward the sky, the deeply rutted roads, the sagging fences that girdled farms, and the unmended gates

listing on their hinges. She saw the shacks and the cottages, the wooden planks of the porches eaten by the weather, and the chimneys begging to be repaired.

They traveled through a widowed, ravaged country. The men were gone—brothers, husbands, fathers, sweethearts, sons—gone to a war that no one understood. What mattered the czar's offended pride now, when the men were so desperately needed to tend their farms and keep their loved ones safe?

"Look." With a deprecatory hand Mikhail swept the darkening horizon. "The countryside is left to the storms, while the rich preach a war that will keep them safe. Will the arms merchants and the profiteers bring back the men who are needed here? Will they come to plow the fields of the men who died for them? Will they bring bags of grain and sacks of fodder to the widows and the orphaned children?"

The specter of death seemed to hang over the barren land. Marina looked down at the cluster of houses that nestled at their feet. She shuddered. This was a Russia she had never known, a land no one knew in the glistening parlors of the capital.

She heard the angry strength in Mikhail's voice and saw that his eyes were hard. "Look, look what they have done, the generals and the politicians and the gun merchants. This is their work!"

Almost timidly, she touched his arm. "What will you do?"

Mikhail shrugged. "I follow orders. When we get to Jellissawetgrad, we will destroy the arms factory there. Then we will move on to Kolomna and bomb the ammunition plant. We will go on until there are no more weapons factories, no more gun caches. We will break the arms empire! When there are no more guns, when there are no more bullets for the guns, when the supplies of poison gas are destroyed, there will be peace. Because without weapons, there can be no war. The men will come home. They will come back to work the soil and till the land which is theirs by right because for generations they have made it rich with the sweat from their bones. One day . . ." He searched for the words that would convey his dream to her. "One day, Marina, the land will belong to the people. It will be ours and we will be free."

They traveled south. As they came nearer to the front, they saw bands of women and children traveling in long, ragged caravans with bags and cardboard suitcases that held their meager

possessions. A few pots, a pan to cook in, some clothes, and a treasured icon to remind them of the home they had left behind. It was an exodus, civilians fleeing their villages and their cities as the roar of the German cannon and hum of artillery rifles sounded nearer and nearer with every passing day. Afraid, hungry, dispossessed, the long, snaking file of refugees fled. They must move on or be caught in the infernal machine of gunfire.

The eastern plains of Russia loomed vast and frightening ahead. Small children clung to their mothers' skirts and plodded on silently, too weak and too hungry to cry. It was tempting to stop and scour the woods for game or wild berries, but the women kept to the roads. The forests were too dangerous now, the hiding place of deserters as desperate for food as hungry wolves, and as vicious.

Marina drew her woolen shawl closer around her shoulders. She too had left everything she knew, but she had left alone; she had no one to wait for. Where were the fathers of these children, the husbands of these uprooted wives? Did these poor creatures even know in what trench, on what battlefield, their husbands were? Their plight stirred her to a deep compassion, and she was suddenly grateful for her own fate, which now seemed so much easier to bear than theirs.

But she did not understand Mikhail's anger. She could not understand the tie between this and the bombing of the Alexeyev works, no matter how often Mikhail explained how the men like Alexeyev and Viktor were directly responsible for the suffering. This was the way of the world, she wanted to argue, the way it had always been, and the way it would be forever. It was hard and unfair, but war was hard and unfair. What difference did it make to these people that Alexeyev and his kind rode in fine carriages and were rich?

It was the kaiser's fault. Only he and the czar had the power to alleviate the misery and the suffering. If they would make peace, the war would end. If they would only sign a treaty, the guns would fall silent. These women and their children could return to their homes. The men would come back to their farms, and Russia would be once more a land of happiness and plenty.

She did not see that it made any sense for Mikhail to rail against the rich when all this was so obviously the kaiser's doing. Nor was she prepared for his passionate outbursts when she innocently told him of her life in St. Petersburg, of the parties and

the glittering gowns and the dancing. With newly acquired wisdom, she held her tongue. When he spoke, she nodded her head in agreement, although his politics wearied her. She saw that Andrei and Ivan listened to him intently, and that they believed as passionately in what he said as he did himself.

"It is possible," Mikhail would begin, enumerating yet again all the ways in which the wealthy exploited Russia, "for a rich man to buy his son out of prison with a few kopecks pressed into the right palm, or with a word whispered into the right ear. But the poor man's son rots in prison and dies in a Siberian work camp, and nothing is done."

"Yes." Andrei moved his feet closer to the fire. "And whereas a poor man must account for every stick of furniture and every spoon in his house when the tax collector comes around, the rich hide their gold in foreign banks and boast about it over dinner."

Marina wiggled impatiently. Dear God, how tired they made her with their dreary politics. What would she not give for an hour of happy conversation—frivolous talk about a play, a dress, a scandal. Anything but this endless liturgy.

She bridled silently, and tried not to listen. What difference can it make to you if I wear a pretty gown? she wanted to shriek. Would these people in their hovels or the men in prison be happier or better off if I dressed in sackcloth and went barefoot? Would it really matter to anyone at all if I ceased to love beautiful jewelry and stopped longing for pretty things? Let them talk, she thought with a shrug of her shoulders—if they had known what I knew in St. Petersburg, they would not be so quick to cast it aside. And besides, was not a love of pleasure as important as a love of politics? Was not a woman in a gorgeous gown more lovely to look at than a woman in an ugly woolen dress? She shook her head. She would never understand Mikhail.

As time passed, Marina taught herself to ignore Mikhail's politics. If the men's talk bored her, she simply thought of other matters; she would look at Mikhail and wonder if what she felt for him was love. He was strong and good. And he was gentle with her now. She was drawn to him by the force of his passion, even though it centered on convictions she would never understand. But she knew that he loved her, and having never known the love of a man, she responded to his passion with tenderness, and she was content.

She lay in his arms at night, and he caressed her reverently,

tracing the outline of her body tenderly. She was overcome by his need for her.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured. Her body yielded under him, and as he entered her she felt his passion and knew the pleasure he found in her. In his arms she forgot the horror of Viktor's twisted face. She felt peace, and a union she had never experienced with a man before.

But there was no passion, no wild stirring of the senses, none of the turbulent release a less innocent woman might have longed for. Marina was aware of an emptiness inside her, and she wondered if what she knew with Mikhail was the passion in whose name so many crimes had been committed. Would she forfeit home, honor, position, for this? Would she turn her back on everything to experience this sweet content? No, a voice whispered through her mind, you would not break your life for this.

But my life was broken long before I met him, Marina thought, fighting her own heart. Perhaps a life can break but once.

## 15



In February 1915, a month to the day after the terrible explosion that rocked the Alexeyev factory outside of Kiev, a similar incident occurred at the Butalskiev works fifteen kilometers to the west of Vinniza. Like the Alexeyev works, the Butalskiev factories suffered extensive damage, which made further production of arms an impossibility—a distressing and embarrassing state of affairs at the best of times. But these were not the best of times for the war machine once described as the Russian steamroller. The owner of the Butalskiev factory, a certain Anatoli Kugarin, had just signed a contract with the Imperial Office of Weapons and Supplies, promising a large and constant supply of arms for as long as the armies needed them. Only last week he had announced his plan to keep the foundries in full operation around the clock so that not one precious hour should be lost to idleness. And now, with the ink barely dry on the imperial agreement, his factories had been blown to the sky. It was not to be tolerated! With impotent rage he stormed into the chambers of his friend, the chief of the Okhrana, Igor Mitsenku.

"Do you mean to tell me that with all the men at your command, with the"—his arms flailed helplessly as the elegant phrase he sought escaped him—"the *carte blanche* they gave you, the

right to search and arrest without explanation, it is still possible for such outrages to be perpetrated upon the friends of the government, on patriots like myself, who devote day and night to the protection of their country?" he finished.

Igor Mitsenku tried not to smile. He pretended to be absorbed in the papers on his desk. As chief of police, even in this pastoral outpost of the empire, he had seen too much of the underside of human nature to be intimidated by the outburst of the man who stood raging on his carpet. Anatoli Kugarin almost never dropped his voice below a shout—he threatened and bellowed, but under all the noise, the man was as easy to frighten as a girl.

"Anatoli, Anatoli, my friend, calm yourself," Mitsenku urged, biting back the sarcastic remarks that rose to his lips. You, a patriot? he wanted to ask. My friend, let us face the facts. You are a man who has never spared a moment's thought for anything but how the next ruble would find its way to your pocket. And now, because the war is making you richer than you ever dreamed possible, you call yourself a patriot. "Anatoli," he said in a voice that did not invite discussion, "I have already told you that according to our investigation the explosion was the result of an accident in the powder shed. You yourself admit that such accidents are possible. With the factories working day and night, is it not more likely than ever that such an accident, such a very unfortunate accident, would occur?"

Anatoli Kugarin was startled. "Igor," he whispered through pale lips, "I have never seen you like this. What are you saying?"

"I am saying," the other man replied quietly, "that the newspapers have reported that the explosion was due to an accident. It is not pleasant to find you mistrusting my judgment." He rose, to indicate that the interview was at an end.

"Don't worry yourself needlessly," Mitsenku said as he led his guest to the door. "We must all learn to be philosophical in this life. Let us say that it is the will of God. What God has decreed, we are powerless to undo. Besides, even without your factory, you are not a poor man."

"Ah, you surprise me, Igor," Anatoli Kugarin remarked sourly. "You are becoming a religious man in your old age."

"One never knows when one might need the help of the Almighty. As a political man I prefer to remain on his good side." Igor Mitsenku smiled. "By the way," he added, "I presume that

you and Madame Kugarin will be joining my wife and me for supper this evening as planned?"

"Of course," Kugarin replied. "We will see if, together, we cannot persuade the Almighty to roll up his sleeves and rebuild my factory."

When the door closed behind the temporarily mollified Kugarin Igor Mitsenku breathed a sigh of relief. The immediate problem of pacifying Kugarin had been solved, but he was not a step closer to solving the mystery. Kugarin could not believe the story of accidental explosion forever. No, Igor thought grimly, the facts must be faced with a clear eye. He sighed once more, and this time the sound was one of resignation rather than relief.

The slim dossier that he had been reading when Kugarin burst into his office still lay on his desk. It was a detailed but inconclusive account of the destruction of the Alexeyev works, and a full report on the demolition that had been done in the Butalskiev factory. Mitsenku knew by heart the attached memorandum, which took great pains to note the similarity between the two incidents. The truth was plain: the two incidents were too much alike—they were obviously the work of the same man.

Or men. What was he dealing with, one man, two, or a trained army of saboteurs? It was too much to hope that this was the work of a madman. The imperial state had deadly enemies, and it was his job to rout them out.

What he had not told Kugarin was that only this morning the mysterious foe had struck again. This time it was a small munitions depot near the railway. Once more the explosion had been localized, perfectly controlled so that the bomb had obliterated the depot and left the nearby buildings untouched. Spectacularly efficient work. Even Mitsenku was forced to recognize its professional artistry.

The newspapers had cooperated—the alarming series of explosions would be portrayed as merely coincidental. But Mitsenku knew that he would have to do better for his superiors in St. Petersburg. Luckily for him they had not had time to bother themselves with his problems. Still, it was merely a matter of time before the dreadful words "Bolshevik" and "anarchists" were connected to the bombings. Mitsenku must find the man before he struck again.

Mitsenku was not a fool. It was obvious to him that Czar



Nicholas' regime was a splendid castle resting on a most tremulous foundation. These criminals could bring the whole edifice crashing to the ground, and when they did, Mitsenku's head would roll. Prison. Siberia. By God, Mitsenku thought desperately, he wouldn't care if the country were run by the kaiser, but why did he have to be in this position?

The whole country was in disorder, the war a disaster, internal security a farce. Only last week he had forced the arrest of several students and a professor from the university because they had dared to hold public meetings calling for the removal of the czar. He knew it was but a gesture toward the rule of order. What good does it do me, he fumed, to throw a handful of rabble-rousers into dungeons, when the real criminals can move freely about the countryside, blowing up guarded buildings and making a mockery of my police?

Three bombings, and nothing—not the most insignificant lead, not even the usual informer. He knew that he looked a fool, a bumbler.

What he needed was a tangible victory—the bodies of the saboteurs swinging from the district gallows, for instance. Barring that, anything, anything at all to put an end to the wave of terrorism that was oversweeping his province.

Mitsenku's fingers absently drummed a tattoo on his desk. His jaw clenched as he stared with decidedly mixed emotions at the portrait of the czar hung in a place of honor on the wall. Yes, there was a solution.

He must ask the army for assistance. God, he thought, there are enough of them camped here, living off the resources of the province while they wait for their orders. Just twelve miles to the south, an encampment of cossack troops had idled for weeks, while the fighting army suffered devastating setbacks in Poland. The cossacks! To set cossack troops, hungry for war and blood, on his little band of saboteurs, would be like letting starving wolves into a pen of lambs. Mitsenku smiled. If only there weren't the indignity of running to the army with a problem that the police could not solve!

Only last week the chief of staff had personally assured him that it would give him great pleasure if the army could be of any assistance to the police. Mitsenku was not to hesitate, not to stand on any formality or any jurisdictional technicality. The assurance had been accompanied by a sly, superior smile that had

infuriated Mitsenku, hardening his resolve to never accept the offer. But now, a week later, that resolve had been dissipated by reality.

"My men would be proud . . ." General Babichok had offered affably, and Mitsenku cringed at the remembered condescension in the man's cultured voice. Now, Mitsenku had no choice. Perhaps later he could find a way to make it clear that the Okhrana had done the work, or that the cossacks had been called in merely as a brotherly gesture to show that in his province there was no rift between police and army.

And if somehow the saboteurs managed to elude twelve thousand mounted cossacks (and damn them, at times they seemed capable of it), he would not hesitate to point out how the army had bungled it. One way or another, he could take the wind out of Babichok's sails. But the particulars of the incident could be left for later. The vital thing was to eliminate the saboteurs. The countryside was being put to the torch, and he must douse the flame.

Mitsenku returned the disconcerting gaze of the czar, and with a decisive movement reached for his pen. It rustled dryly, quickly, over the paper as he framed his request, lips pursed in concentration. His tone must be urgent enough to warrant a fast response, but not desperate. The general must not know his help was being begged in an eleventh-hour situation. He reread what he had written. No, this was too conciliatory, too timid. He balled up the paper and discarded it. He must strike the proper note between a request and an order.

He began again. There. This was better. Diplomatic, but firm. He folded the message and sealed it, stamping the little puddle of red wax with the imperial double-headed eagle, the seal of his office.

He rang for his secretary and handed him the letter. "Kavanisu, take this to General Babichok at his headquarters right away. Make it clear that you expect to return with a message."

A few hours later, he had his reply. "My dear Mitsenku," the general had written in the best telegraphic army style. "Honored to be of assistance. Am dispatching troop details to search the area immediately, as per your request. Hope to have good news for you shortly."

"Not bad. Not excellent, but very promising when one con-

siders that two months ago you could not tell one end of a stick of dynamite from the other. With experience, it is possible that you may improve," Ivan admitted grudgingly.

"Oh, come, Ivan!" Marina laughed, snuggling in the warm circle of Mikhail's arms and feeling the heat from the little wood fire on her frozen legs. "Mikhail, tell him what a good saboteur I have become."

"Marina Lebedev, you are an excellent pupil," Mikhail replied very gravely. "Don't let Ivan here discourage you. Even he was not born knowing his trade. He risked his own neck to learn it, like the rest of us."

Marina felt the most imperceptible tightening of his arms around her, and she heard the tenderness in his voice. She knew she had done well, and she felt proud of herself. She had handed the timers and the wires to Andrei quickly, without tangling them or faltering. True, after they escaped and the blasts began to tear the trainload of weapons to shreds, her knees suddenly turned to water. She had wondered if she could trust herself to walk, but by sheer force of will she had regained control of her wobbling limbs. She had seen the admiring, surprised look in Ivan's eyes tonight, and she knew how proud Mikhail was of her.

She sighed happily. "Tomorrow we'll blow up more guns, and then more guns and still more guns," she sang in a singsong like a schoolchild.

Andrei laughed. "You are turning out to be dangerous, Marina Lebedev," he said. "Maybe one day we will send the czar packing and put you in his place. Another Catherine the Great—Marina the Saboteur."

A dimple quivered in Marina's cheeks, and she stared at the crackling fire. Marina the Saboteur! A very different woman from the frightened child who had promised to be Viktor's wife. What would Mama think of me if she knew? Marina wondered. Would she be proud? Would she be angry? Would she understand? I tried to be a fine lady, Mama, but by hating them for you, this is what I have become. Can you forgive me? Try to believe that one day, no matter how long it takes, I will show them that to be your daughter is enough. But I am learning to destroy, to ruin, to hurt. When all I ever wanted was to hurt those who hurt you. . . ." Her forehead creased into a frown.

As if he guessed her disturbing thoughts, Mikhail hugged her

closer to him. He nuzzled her ear tenderly. "I love you, Marina," he whispered.

But Marina stirred uneasily in his arms. She rose abruptly, the fevered joy she had felt a few minutes ago over her success as an apprentice saboteur evaporated into sadness. She wanted to be alone.

"We need more wood for the fire," she said. She pulled her scarf closer around her throat and half-ran to the stream that ran through their campsite. She followed the sparkling brook for a few paces, noting how the ice twinkled at her feet, like a river of stars, a tiny magical galaxy as mysterious and unfathomable as the sky overhead. She turned and looked back at the campsite. The three men were sitting quietly, staring into the fire, watching the flames dance over the dry wood. She knew then that she did not truly share their dreams. Her heart twisted in pain. Mikhail, she thought, how young and strong and pure you are. How much you know of pain, how your memories torment you. And yet you steel yourself with hatred and it scars you. Mikhail, she wanted to cry out, come and look. It is beautiful here by the stream, but you cannot see it. Look, Mikhail, the beauty will comfort you. Her eyes filled with tears. Perhaps tomorrow she would bring him here. She would make him see. She would not let him go until he saw for himself the stars in the crisp white snow. Tomorrow she would show him what he had forgotten how to see.

The frozen branches of the trees above her cracked in a gust of wind, and Marina glanced up to marvel at the delicate, lace-like canopy of crystalline limbs. She was standing in an enchanted bower whose roof was set with icy diamonds. The moon shimmered softly on the glacial, crusted snow, reflecting brilliantly off the gossamer mosaic of the trees. Marina felt her heart lift as she wandered through the enchantment of the forest, the deep lonely peace of the night. St. Petersburg seemed far behind her, the quiet terror of capture that dogged them throughout the long weeks seemed to disappear under the awesome beauty of the Russian woods. There was no danger, nothing that mattered but the majestic splendor of the winter night. She walked on, farther and farther from the small encampment, happy in the enchanted forest.

Later, she could not remember what instinct had warned her. All she knew was that all at once the spell was broken. She

turned and ran toward the small fire and the three men she had come to love.

She fought through the branches which whipped against her face, cutting her. The forest that had seemed a sanctuary now became a live thing, holding her back. She flew over the icy roots which conspired to trip her, the slipperiness of the frozen snow, the moonlit beauty transformed into a landscape of horror.

She had nearly reached the stream when the deep thunder of horses' hooves reached her. The horses burst into the open beyond the camp, and Marina plunged through the streambed, the icy chill of the water unfelt.

A crack of a rifle and the whine of a bullet overhead, then the night was a rage of shouts and rifle fire. In the ghastly light Ivan grabbed for his pistol. But it was too late. A rain of bullets pierced him; he clutched at his belly and turned unsteadily. Then the side of his head was ripped away, his face suddenly obliterated by the blackness of the blood. He fell. Beyond him she saw the silhouettes of the riders, tall, black, as fearful as death.

A voice carried over the deafening din of the rifles, and Marina turned to see Mikhail's tall form running low among the trees to her left.

"Run, Marina, to the stream. 'Run!' she heard Mikhail shout above the whistle of bullets. The horsemen had encircled him, guns aimed at him and at Andrei.

Marina ran, but not back to the safety of the stream. She could not leave him. She ran toward the campfire, screaming Mikhail's name.

Mikhail motioned her back. "Marina, save yourself!" The last warning was buried in a hail of bullets.

They hit Andrei first, and he pitched forward into the snow. Mikhail raised his hand pistol, but in the same instant the flame spat from the barrel of a rider's gun and Mikhail sank to his knees. Marina plunged toward him, her arms open. He fell forward into her embrace.

"Come back, Mikhail, come back!" Marina screamed. "Don't die, my love, don't leave me." But she knew from the weight of him in her arms that he was dead.

Suddenly the winter night was still. Then heavy boots crunched through the snow behind her, but she was past caring. She held Mikhail close to her and sobbed his name. "Don't leave me, don't leave me," she wept. Suddenly she was wrenched to her

feet by powerful arms. She felt strong, merciless hands push against her throat, holding her immobile, the cold steel of a pistol against her forehead, and she closed her eyes.

Someone struck a match, and the heat of the flame singed her cheek.

"Look at me."

Marina opened her eyes and looked into eyes as gray and savagely cold as the icy night.

Marina gasped with horror. Sergei Rogozhin!

"So, Marina Lebedev . . ." came the voice that she hated. "We wondered what had become of you."



In the early dusk a slight figure dressed in the pale blue-gray uniform of the Don Cossacks struggled up a muddy, rutted lane that divided the sea of brown tents, hastily constructed shelters, and makeshift paddocks. Half a year before, the land had been flat, open fields where fat cattle drank and grazed in bucolic peace. Now the green meadows had vanished; five thousand men waited here for the order to advance to the front lines. The camp was less than forty kilometers from the front; in the quiet hours of the night, the guns of battle could be heard and the dark sky was illuminated with flares exploding in the heavens like a shower of meteors. The once-sweet air now smelled of dank straw, unwashed bodies, and horses. The steam from the cookpots where the men simmered their endless stews of purloined vegetables and stringy goat meat perfumed the camp with a heavy, pungent smell.

The weight of a double yoke bit mercilessly into Marina's thin shoulders. Two heavy buckets, filled to the brim with water, dangled from the wooden crosspiece. The water splashed noisily as the wooden pails creaked back and forth on leather ties. The legs of Marina's trousers and the breast of her rough woolen tunic were soaked through. Using words that she had heard freely bandied around the camp by the men, she cursed silently

as the freezing water dribbled into her thick, ungainly leather boots. The buckets lurched back and forth, and Marina lost her footing, staggered forward, and nearly fell headlong onto the muddy track. Tears of frustration prickled her eyes. She steadied the buckets with a shaking hand—how she longed to fling the yoke and buckets onto the steep path! But she was too aware of the glances that followed her up the hill and the whispered comments of the men and the knowing smiles as Captain Rogozhin's "boy" struggled under the unwieldy yoke. Marina knew that her soldier's uniform and the soiled kerchief that bound her hair fooled no one. She knew too that only the men's fear of their captain's proverbial temper and their respect for him as a fighter kept her safe in a camp of men hungry for women. There were other women in the camp, creatures with hard faces and tattered skirts, who served the soldiers as cooks or masqueraded as valiant sweethearts braving the roughness of this life for the lives of their men. But the truth had an older, less sentimental reality, and these women plied the most ancient trade in the world, just as legions of camp followers had always serviced armies of warriors. The Tartars and the cossacks treated their whores with rough kindness, but the pressure of forced inactivity as they waited for the day when they would quit their campfires and at long last face the enemy on the open plain put an edge on their tempers. Besides, they were hard, hot-blooded men, and the shortage of women led to fierce fights where men pitted body and blade in battle for the whores—in a camp full of hardy, restless men, there were never enough women to satisfy them all, and an undercurrent of violence threatened to explode at any moment.

Marina knew that it was only thanks to Sergei Rogozhin that she was safe—so far—and no words could express how much it stung her pride to be in his debt.

Marina scowled and made her way up the hill to the outskirts of the encampment where the officers lived. For while the Tartars and the Don Cossacks might sleep in the open under the stars, in rain and bitter cold, the officers lived a little more grandly. Overlooking the camp to the west and the copse of trees and the plain on the east, they had erected cantonments of mud brick and logs which offered the advantage of planked and tarred roofs and a dry earth floor underfoot. Their windows were covered with



oilcloth which allowed the morning light to come through and served as a barrier against the flies that buzzed lazily in the hot sun of the afternoon.

Seated by the campfire in front of Sergei Rogozhin's quarters, Chekalin watched Marina move through the camp. He was a man of middle years, a cossack who had long since forsaken hearth and family for his regiment, for he loved the soldier's life, and even the weeping of his childhood sweetheart, whom he had honored by marrying and upon whom he had bestowed a half-dozen children, could not keep him from the army life which suited him far better than the life of a respectable farmer.

Tonight Chekalin's ruddy face had a melancholy cast. What a fool he is, he thought, watching the lithe figure from under heavy-lidded eyes. The girl had character, breeding, and courage—all the things one could ask of a woman. And who would not lose his head over that pale heart-shaped face and those eyes of which, the Holy Mother be his witness, he had not seen the likes in his life? Chekalin lit his pipe thoughtfully, filling his lungs with the rough smoke. A much better woman on all counts than the blond he had seen the captain with in Kiev. Countess Berenskaya was a stunning woman, to be sure, but hard, a strange woman. Just the sort to make trouble for a man. Already rumors were running through the camp that it was because of this creature, this countess, that the troops were still awaiting their orders after so many months. "It's for the sake of the captain's ass that we're all still sitting on ours, instead of fighting like men," Chekalin had heard a soldier remark, and he had to admit, with a twinge of guilt for his disloyalty to the captain, that he agreed. It was a fact that Countess Berenskaya was known to have influence on General Babatsov, upon whom their marching orders ultimately depended, and if she wished it, Chekalin mused darkly, the orders of the men could be delayed indefinitely.

Captain Rogozhin had been given to sudden, inexplicable bursts of temper and long sullen bouts of sulking. The situation had become so bad that Chekalin was beginning to have nostalgic thoughts about his wife and his farm. "I did not join the army to live at the mercy of one man's temper," he told himself firmly. The trouble had started when the captain brought the girl Marina back to the camp. Almost overnight the captain's drinking binges had increased, his temper was always at the boiling

point, and it was hardly possible to get a civil word from him. He's in love with the girl, Chekalin decided shrewdly. But he doesn't know it. The ugly uniform he makes her wear. He's still taken by the countess's silks and airs, and he cannot see that right under his nose is the most lovely creature in all of Russia. Poor little thing, waiting on him hand and foot like a prisoner condemned to hard labor, and her such a lady, she never says a word.

Chekalin's lady trudged wearily on, the effort of fighting the weight that pressed down upon her shoulders causing a most unladylike film of sweat to break out upon her forehead; under her breath she muttered words that would have made even the sympathetic Chekalin pale had he divined them.

I hate him, she thought, as the face of Sergei Rogozhin came once more, unbidden, into her mind. "I want him to die. I want to watch the life's blood seep out of him, drop by drop. I want to rip the skin off his miserable body with a knife—a rusty knife, she specified with grim precision, the captain's imagined agony soothing her own weary body. She would do it herself, as soon as she had the chance. What pleasure she would take in tormenting him, making him scream for mercy, making him beg for her to plunge the blade into his heart and be done with it! "What heart, Captain?" she imagined herself asking coyly. "You have no heart." She would not let him go; after all she had suffered at his hands, she would not soften to his pleas. She needed the joy of seeing Sergei Rogozhin broken and humiliated, just as he had broken and humiliated her. Dear God, she prayed, let me tear the beating heart from his breast and feed it to the dogs! She was so angry that she hardly noticed the encouraging wink old Chekalin cast at her. She kicked open the half-closed door of Captain Rogozhin's quarters and let the yoke clatter noisily to the ground.

The object of her murderous prayers greeted her with a grunt and a malicious sidelong glance. Wearing only the red-striped blue trousers of the Don Cossack field uniform, he was engrossed in studying a map. It was heavily crisscrossed with thin lines and darkly inked blocks showing the Germans' gains against the dogged but ill-armed Russian troops.

"There you are, my dearest," Sergei said darkly. Marina saw that the bottle of vodka at his elbow was more than half-empty. "What kept you so long? I thought you had run away or taken a

fancy to one of the men—surely there must be a dashing anarchist or two in the camp." He laughed sourly at his attempt at humor and took a mouthful of the stinging liquor to wash down the bitter taste of bile in his mouth.

Her lip curled in a sneer of disgust at his words. "Filthy vermin," she muttered through her clenched teeth.

He turned on her, his eyes burning like coals under his cap of dark hair. "What did you say, your Highness?" he asked, his voice dangerously low. Marina felt a thrill of terror shoot through her. For the first time, she confronted him and stood face to face with the naked fury in his eyes. She felt her courage draining from her. Her knees shook uncontrollably.

His words cracked through the air like a whip. "Oh, no, Countess. I have had a bellyful of your ill-natured sulking. Don't forget that it is thanks to me that you are alive today, and that for all your superior airs you are a wanted criminal, a murderer."

With perverse pleasure he saw a look of hot anger come into her eyes under the impact of his words. By God, he thought admiringly in spite of himself, she has spirit after all.

"Murderess!" Marina spat with the full vehemence of her loathing. "You call me a murderess," she flared. "It was because of you, at my party, when you . . . when you . . ." She faltered helplessly, unable to say to his face the words she had so often repeated to herself.

How she longed to fly at him, to rake her nails on his handsome, cruel face, to dig her fingers into his eyes that looked on her with such scorn. Oh, how she wanted to see the blood pearl on his cheeks, to hear the sharp intake of his breath as she plunged a dagger into his ribs!

"Viktor saw," she sputtered, somehow helpless before his gaze. "He saw you kiss me."

She did not see the tenderness that suddenly melted the pinpoints of ice in his eyes. He realized with surprise that he knew nothing of her life since their brief encounter in St. Petersburg. Nothing—except what he had seen of her with Mikhail. Marina weeping, clinging to her lover's dead body, told him more than words could ever tell. As for the part of Marina's life between Viktor's party and Mikhail, only the fear in her eyes when the men in the camp teased her hinted at the ugly truth. "Marina, you were so young, you knew nothing of men . . ."

But Marina heard only mockery in his voice. She raised her clenched fists, daring him to come closer. "I know what real men are," she stormed angrily. "Not men like Viktor—and like you—who treat women as piteous children and servants. Mikhail was a man!" she spat. No longer could she hold the tears in check. "Mikhail, Mikhail, Mikhail," she wailed, her voice breaking in grief.

A stab of jealousy shot through Sergei. The memory of Mikhail Zudin filled the room like a malefic genie.

"You killed him," Marina cried. "You . . . you . . . filthy murderer!"

Sergei's throat was suddenly parched. He longed to take her by her slim shoulders and shake her until her teeth rattled.

"Yes, my dear," he said very quietly. "I killed him. My orders were to bring him in alive—to bring all the men in alive," he added with pointed emphasis. "To deliver you to the tender mercy of Mitsenku and his Okhrana interrogators. But I am not a murderer, my dear. I am a soldier. And as a soldier, I preferred to shoot them point-blank and let them die quickly and honorably. A soldier's death rather than a death that would come by slow and painful degrees."

She was quieted by the horrible truth he spoke.

But the memory of the hatred in her eyes still stung him. "Anton Voroshilov, deputy of the Okhrana, and also an acquaintance of our dear departed Viktor, is in this neighborhood, paying an official call, as a matter of fact. If you really are interested in pursuing the question further, my precious dove, I am sure the gentlemen would be delighted to see you."

But he regretted his brutal words as soon as they were said.

"You should have killed me too, in your great mercy," Marina shot at him. "Better that than to live here as your servant." Her eyes blazed up at him. "Why did you bring me here? To give me up to Voroshilov?"

Sergei laughed shortly, not denying the accusation. Let her worry, he thought. "Because I thought you might come in handy," he said, his voice heavy with mocking innuendo.

Before she could stop herself, Marina had a heavy wooden bucket in her hands and she flung it at him, drenching him in an icy splash of water.

There was a terrible silence as the water dripped down Sergei's face, ran in tiny rivulets along his muscular torso. The empty

bucket dropped from her hand, and she screamed as Sergei, his face as dark as a thundercloud, advanced slowly toward her. His strong, lean hands closed over her narrow shoulders. An evil light danced behind his thick lashes; she felt his hot breath against her cheek. Then his mouth was on hers, his hands slipped around the small of her back, and she felt his passion pulsing and burning through her, obliterating everything. At that moment the old bitterness between them fell away and Marina gave herself to his embrace, bound to him by an emotion stronger than hatred.

In an easy, graceful gesture, Sergei swung her up into his arms and very tenderly laid her down on his cot. His hands loosened her rough tunic and roamed over her with increasing license. As his fingers teased along her skin, she moaned beneath his caress, her body arching toward him. Sergei's hands slipped the trousers from her hips and the boots from her feet. She was naked under him, her mouth greedy for his, her arms drawing him closer, her eyes wide as he caressed her burning breasts. His lips grazed the soft skin of her belly, a soft fire searing her flesh where he touched her. But she squirmed with shame as he descended lower, to the most secret part of her body. The blood rushed to her cheeks, but he held her fast and she surrendered to the ecstasy of this new sensation.

Then he was over her, his body hard and possessive. The broad sweep of his shoulders and his tender gray eyes circumscribed the heavens of her world. She opened to him and he took her, and she heard herself cry his name in love and surrender.

When Marina awoke, a figure in uniform was standing over her, a dark, handsome man with shining gray eyes that looked at her with a passionate intensity and a faint, ironic smile of bewilderment. Marina smiled up at him, stretching lazily. "Go back to sleep," he whispered tenderly, and he tucked the blanket around her. "I am leaving for a few hours, but I will be back as soon as I can, my darling." He kissed her softly on the mouth.

"Promise me you are not leaving me for Darya Ivanovna," Marina teased tenderly.

"I love only you, Marina," Sergei whispered. Safe in their discovery of each other, she drifted back to sleep.



"Leave me."

The deepening shadows of a Russian spring afternoon filled the room in which Darya Ivanovna reclined, as indolent as an odalisque, her fair head on a cloud of cushions. The languorous, weary tone left the little maid in no uncertainty as to her mistress's wishes, and she glanced fretfully at the pearl-pink satin couch upon which Darya's queenly figure was stretched. The provincial child bobbed a clumsy curtsy and fled from the room, pulling the heavy door of time-weathered oak closed behind her.

The precise click of the highly polished brass latch at her hand sounded to Tamara Borislava like the peal of heavenly trumpets, announcing her salvation from the trials of an unbearably harsh existence, and the shock of the breath of freedom was as startling to her as would have been a cruse of vodka.

She adjusted the white starched bow of her apron and patted at the smooth honey-colored braids that coiled about her head. Satisfied that everything was in order, she glanced out an open window at wild, high grass and the small white birches where the forest encroached on the meadow. Above the trees, the sky was suddenly dark and heavy with the chill promise of snow. One could walk for a day before setting foot on land that was

not now deeded to the name of Darya Ivanovna Berenskaya. The forest with packs of timber wolves prowling like gray shadows through the trees belonged to the countess. The broad fields where the ceaseless Russian wind set the poppies bobbing like flames at harvest time belonged to her. The blond, distant, inscrutable woman was at the center of life in this huge stone house. She was like a human fortress, safe against everything, even the fear of the Austrian troops pressing in on the Russian lines less than one hundred miles away.

The hum and chatter of the six servants busy at their tasks in the square basement cook room ceased as she entered. They looked up with sly shifting of the eyes to see who the visitor might be, and resumed work promptly should the countess herself be paying them a visit. As Tamara's shoes and the plain black hem of her skirt appeared beneath the lintel of the door, the servants relaxed and resumed their gossip. With a nod of greeting, the cook poured a thin soup into a wooden bowl and set it upon the table before Tamara. Good, she thought with an inward sigh of relief that they had not teased her. Why does the mistress frighten me so? she wondered. She is not impatient or brusque.

She had proved remarkably undemanding. Other ladies of her station expected perfection, and became petulant and incensed even when their maids were the epitome of care and efficiency. Tamara had heard many a story of angry beatings and cruel punishments from her friends who worked on the other estates. No, Darya Ivanovna was not like that. Not once had she raised her voice in rebuke. If Tamara's fingers fumbled awkwardly when she dressed the countess's hair, or if her hands shook noticeably when she poured the fragrant oils into the bath, Darya Ivanovna had never uttered a word or made a single exclamation over the girl's obvious clumsiness.

Only yesterday evening, when the mistress was preparing to go out, Tamara in her nervousness had tipped over a crystal vial of perfume. Before she could regain her wits, the perfume bit into the polished floor and stained the edge of the delicate carpet. Sobbing penitent tears, Tamara had scrubbed at the ugly stain with her apron, waiting for the storm of justifiable fury to break loose upon her head.

It did not come. Other ladies would have vented their anger

and scolded her, boxed her ears in vexation over the accident, or perhaps even dismissed her for her bungling. Girls were sent packing for much lesser offenses. Work was difficult enough to find, what with many of the noble families having abandoned their estates for safer refuges, some having even left the country entirely. If she were dismissed now, it would bring unbearable hardship on her mother and little brothers, who needed her wages. But with a mere shrug, Darya Ivanovna dismissed the incident, hardly glancing away from her book.

Nothing could perturb her calm. This regal beauty seemed to be lost in a world that was far from them all, impenetrable, a domain not given to the ephemeral concern of broken vials of perfume, however costly. So why did one always have the feeling that the moment one looked away from the icy green eyes, it was like being stalked by a restless tigress?

Tamara's broad forehead puckered in pensive concentration. For all her youth—she would be seventeen the following month—she was not a flighty girl content with simple answers. Trying to peer behind the mysterious facade that Darya presented, she mused on the horrible tales that she heard in the village, where stories about Darya Ivanovna were on everyone's tongue. She remembered a snowy day when old Aksinia enthralled her listeners with a petrifying tale.

Gossip was the order of the day when the servants from the various estates met during their chores in the small provincial town of Kolumna. That winter the newly returned countess was on everyone's mind. It was far more entertaining to hear of the mistress's wicked girlhood than to worry over the chilling reality of troop trains rolling past the village, or the massive encampment of cossacks perched not five kilometers away. Tamara's own sweetheart was a gunner with the twelfth infantry, and so, like the others who twisted nervous fingers around handkerchiefs and listened with palpitating hearts as the casualty lists were read aloud in the square, she escaped into old Aksinia's fascinating histories of Kolumna's most intriguing citizen.

"She put the old countess into her grave!" Aksinia spat contemptuously into the dust at her feet where she sat on the doorstep of her wooden house. "The face of an angel she has, but don't be deceived. She has the heart of the blackest devil in hell. She was not yet fifteen, beautiful yes, but already a shameless hussy when her father found her in the barn, her skirts up over



her head. The man with her was a captain in her father's guard, a young fellow as sinful as she. Lucky for them that the count arrived in time, for if the captain had defiled her, you can be sure that neither he nor that blond bitch would be alive today to breathe God's good air. Not that she's changed one bit since, the filthy slut. The count had the young captain broken out of the army as if it had been the poor man's fault. Lay the blame on her yellow head!" Aksinia screamed with terrifying vehemence. "A bitch in heat attracts every dog in the village. If the count had given her free rein she would have spread her thighs for every man in the barracks, like the whore she is."

Tamara listened with a guilty fascination, knowing that she should move away so that such slander could not touch her ears, but unable to tear herself away. Encouraged and flattered by the attention, and well aware that Darya's young maid was in her audience, Aksinia tapped her sunken cheek with a gnarled finger and rolled her eyes to the heavens.

"There was a fine scandal about it. The old countess took to her bed for a month, and it was well over a year before she dared show her face in society again. As for the count, he knew what his daughter was. He dragged her out of the barn, wisps of straw still clinging to her skirt and in her hair. There was fear in the cold green eyes. But there was no shame, none! Her father dragged her to the copse of trees beyond the barn. She was stripped down to her shift, tied to an oak like an animal he was about to brand. The whole estate had come running out from wherever they might be, mouths agape. But the count didn't care if they all saw. In plain sight of everyone, he whipped her until she was half-dead."

The old woman's eyes flickered with a dull flame at the memory of the unforgettable day, and it seemed to Tamara that no one dared to draw a breath, lest the old woman fall into silence.

"'Cry out to God for mercy!' he screamed at her." Aksinia raged at the memory, and now it was as if the count himself had come to life in her shriveled body. "'Beg for forgiveness for the depravity that is in your soul!' But she wouldn't cry out, no matter how hard he beat her. She was strong, strong as he was, with the evil that lay inside her. The count's arm must have been sore from whipping her. He didn't stop, just shouting at her to ask for forgiveness, and she with that hard look she has, just staring

straight ahead, like she had no senses left. A full-grown woman, her clothes being ripped from her back by her own father, and with not a trace of shame in her. When he was finished with her, her fine white skin was a sheen of blood. Even the wisps of the golden hair of which she was so proud were matted red, but she never cried out. Not for mercy, nor for God's forgiveness, nor for her father's. Only once did she scream, so loud that you could hear it in the village, but not for forgiveness. She threw back her head and made a loud, terrible sound, more like an animal's cry than anything human. Like she was cursing him."

Aksinia turned slightly, with a slowness that was mesmerizing, and when she stopped, her witch's eyes were glaring directly at Tamara. "It did the soul good to see that fine young countess with her superior airs dance under her father's whip. He beat her until the crop broke on her back. He tore her tempting creamy skin to ribbons."

The old woman burst into a foul, raucous laugh. Tamara's heart felt like a stone in her chest, her mind a swirling confusion. She had turned away when a clear, shrill voice cried: "Then he banished her. That's why she went away to Paris, isn't it?"

"Went away? Went away?" Aksinia repeated, cackling with devilish glee at the naiveté of her listener. "The master was so angry he would not let her out of his sight. She was cut down from that tree and led back to the house, the lace of her chemise bloodied and sticking to her back, and her shaking in a kind of rage, like the evil inside her was trying to get loose. He took her up to her room, and there she stayed until she was healed, and for two years after that, he kept her under his eye like a prisoner.

"I heard her once tell the count in a voice of poison how she hated him and her mother too. She said, 'It is you who should beg forgiveness for what you have done to me.'"

On the faces of the onlookers there was awe and disgust.

"'You cannot stop me! You cannot rule me anymore,' Darya Ivanovna said, and with that she rose and walked out." Aksinia paused dramatically. "Six months later, her mother died of grief, as would any mother of such a wicked child. The story of Darya Ivanovna's evil deeds was buried with the old countess, for she wished it so. But the shame of that blond bitch will never be forgotten, for Darya Ivanovna blackened the family name forever."

Tamara had not been able to learn more than that. She remembered what Father Mishiov had told her once. The old priest had supervised her education, and he had been impressed by the quickness and liveliness of her mind. But in provincial Russia, even the great era of changes that they lived in, the priest knew that there was little use for a woman with a questioning intelligence. "You have an inquiring mind, my child," he had said. "See to it that it does not lead you to examine matters that are better left alone. Too much knowledge can lead to unhappiness."

Tamara finished her soup quietly. Perhaps the old priest was right, she thought. Perhaps it was wiser not to peer behind the hard mask that hid Darya Ivanovna from the world. Perhaps what lay behind was even more frightening than what the mask revealed.

But alone, Darya Ivanovna had dropped her mask. She sprang to her feet as lithely as the tigress of Tamara's fearful imaginings and stepped quickly across the carpeted floor.

A small paper-wrapped parcel rested in the middle of a silver tray on the low malachite table. Darya's slim fingers trembled slightly as she touched it, a reaction due to more than contained excitement alone. A shooting pain tore at her stomach, but she dismissed the ache in her loins. Later. She would deal with it later. First she must discover the secrets of the parcel.

The parcel was light, the coarse brown paper covered with ornate postage marks, French, Greek, Romanian, Russian, the stamps of all of the allied nations through which such a package would normally have to travel from Paris to Russia. The edges were dented and slightly torn, the paper ragged, as if the journey of this small and seemingly inconsequential travel had been rigorous, as befitted the wartime post. But as Darya knew, the stamps were mere costume, carefully simulated, and the paper skillfully but artificially weathered.

In truth, the package had come no closer to the hilly roads of Greece and Roumania than it now stood. It had been carried safely by diplomatic pouch, a faster, safer, and more expedient method, but one which would attract too much attention, so for the final leg of its journey the carefully wrought disguise had fooled the overly curious. Even Darya saw the necessity of taking certain precautions to fool those she disdained so easily.

She had returned from France to find that things in her homeland were not ordinary at all. Even as the kaiser's troops pressed in upon the Russian frontiers, anarchists clawed at the fabric of the old imperial order from within, and the whispering zealots who lived like leeches on the blood-gorged body of the Okhrana thrived in the atmosphere of rumor and accusation. Nothing escaped their notice, and the least pretext for suspicion was brought to the attention of that dreaded secret police. Darya Ivanovna Berenskaya had no wish to attract the attention—the undesired attention—of the Okhrana. She did not need to be watched more closely than she already was. In peacetime, no one would have dared touch a lady of her rank, but now the police had license to roam anywhere in the name of state security. A simple indiscretion might easily jeopardize the successful culmination of long-laid and carefully constructed plans.

Darya fumbled with the coarse twine knot, her fingers unsteady. With an exclamation of exasperation she flung it away, and rested, her arms bracing her against the edge of the table, her back arched in agony, a faint mist of sweat chilling her forehead. Always the suddenness, the strength of her craving, took her by surprise. "Not now, not now," she muttered. Darya Ivanovna swayed unsteadily on her feet, and her hands touched her temples to still the pounding as the blood throbbed through her. She snatched at the drawer beneath her hand and grasped a letter opener.

She hacked at the thick twine, working the blade around and around the cord, sawing at it. At last the string snapped, and with a cry of triumph Darya Berenskaya tore away the cocoon of paper.

She held a simple jewelry case in her hand. Morocco leather stamped in gold with the legend "Fabergé Frères Orfèvres, Paris" stamped discreetly on its lid. Her hands shaking almost uncontrollably now, her body racked by cold chills, Darya pried open the box.

A large, brilliantly faceted sapphire cut in the shape of a rose glinted highlights of fire from its nest of creamy satin. An exquisitely fashioned aureole of platinum set with sparkling dewy blue-white diamonds held the central stone. With a gasp that she could not contain, Darya lifted the priceless jewel out of its box, the fine chain of the necklace dangling between her long fingers.

Beautiful, yes, it was beautiful. Breathtaking, as his presents to her always were. This time he had surpassed himself: this was the most exquisite of them all. Her eyes softened for an instant as the jewel sparkled seductively up at her, and in an impulsive gesture she pressed the cool, deep-blue stone to her fevered lips and closed her eyes, as if breathing in the perfume of the gem-stone flower.

Then, as suddenly as she had swept it up, she carelessly dropped the necklace before her onto the rug and tore open the small square envelope that accompanied the gift. "To my darling," the card read, "with my very best wishes." The note was unsigned, and Darya Ivanovna did not need to study the embossed crest to identify the sender. "My darling," she whispered hoarsely, "my own darling."

A spasm of nausea shook her, but she fought it back, and steadied herself. She plucked at the satin cloth that lined the case. With a soft, silky sound the fabric ripped free. Exultation flashed in Darya's green eyes before they filled with happy tears at the sight of the folded onionskin paper lying neatly at the bottom of the box.

"My beloved," the letter began:

Paris is a sad, empty city without you beside me. Here the gold has turned to dross and the splendor which others find here now is invisible to me without you here to illuminate it. Kolumna and its verdant hills are surely the fairest place on earth now that you are there. My every desire brings you back to me, at my side and in my arms, my love, my other self.

But our struggle has separated us, and we must welcome it, for it will make our reunion all the sweeter. The reports bode well. The men of the kaiser and your own countrymen vie in a death struggle that will hasten our triumph no matter who emerges as the victor in this contest. Each day the marshes and wastelands of Galicia fill with the swollen bodies of the dead, and still more doggedly the combatants throw more troops against the enemy, the fresh battalions marching across the backs of the fallen. Their empires will suffocate and die beneath the weight of their corpses.

Reuters and my own sources confirm that the situation on the eastern front heralds catastrophe for Russia; Germany

only weakens herself immeasurably by her struggle against the dying giant. Yet there are reservoirs of strength that the czar has not yet exhausted, and after a year the war only begins to build to a crescendo.

An era ends, my darling Darya. Armageddon is upon us. The faceless, docile multitudes perish, crowns tumble into dust, and all must die or transmute into a new form. The future awaits us, you and I. Let us tread cautiously through the killing ground, harking the cry of the new order which sounds even now, frail but distinct, over the death rattle of perishing empires.

My darling, they howl for bullets. In France, the Fonderies Richelieu and the Armeries Trois Lions make the guns for the French that are turned against the flame lancers my engineers at the Kronstrat works design to German specification. The Tannunruga plant in Austria, the Lubyanskaya works in Russia, my factories in Poland, in the Balkans and in Turkey, are never still. Workers man the machines both day and night, and still they cry for more. If there is, after all, a God, he must smile to see them tear the guns from each other's hands, and I, whose only talent is my lack of illusion and my instinct for divining the madness of my fellowman, watch them enter the death dance brandishing my weapons aloft like field flowers at a springtime rite. The killing must continue at all costs. On that the princes of Europe are agreed.

Let them die their ignominious little deaths and let their duped spirits wing toward their invented heaven on the wings of the illusion of an honorable war and an honorable death. The crooks and the crows will pick out their eyes and the sun will blanch their bones without care for who they were or what prayer dies on their lips with them. The wildflowers will cover their graves as indifferently as I accept the gold they strip from the very altars of their crumbling churches to purchase yet another dance in this macabre minuet.

They invite us to dupe them with blind eagerness, to build a new world on their sun-blached bones.

My darling, how I pity Anton Voroshilov in his love of you, for I only have to imagine that you would turn your

face from me for an instant to know what he suffers. Yet I cannot but envy him the delicious ecstasy of holding you in his arms and running his fingers along the smooth curve of your breast, even though he must know that he can never possess the woman who promises such fulfillment with the merest hint of your smile. Even such anguish is a small price to pay for the touch of your skin.

Do I suffer to think of you in the embrace of this man? My darling, the torment of my knowledge gnaws at me, yet my suffering must be borne. Voroshilov, unlike the others, was not born a fool, and it is only the rottenness of the regime which he champions that has made of him a dupe. Yet he is still dangerous, and I pray that you will not betray yourself to him before he is totally at your mercy. He is my enemy who most resembles me, in his passion of belief he is strong and resolute: he is the worthiest of my opponents, we are not so different, he and I, only our causes differ. Like myself, he has found in you all women and thirsts for the ecstasy of your flesh. My darling, surrender to him as you must, without shame, without fear, knowing that with every breath you take, I am beside you. Seduce him, taunt him, take other lovers, flaunt them, stoke his desire for you into jealous fever which will drive country, honor, prudence from his mind. For your sweet sake he will agree to anything, to all you ask of him. He is so essential to our success.

Beloved, we will rise, you and I, like phoenixes from the ashes of this destruction, I at the helm of the new order, and you beside me, my consort, my queen. The world is mine to hold, and I will lay the plunder of a thousand generations at your feet and toss the wealth of empires into your lap as playthings, in return for which I beg only to be allowed to press my lips upon your hand and seal the pact of our love and the destiny that binds us.

A loneliness filled her as she tossed the letter into the fire and watched it burn in the grate. She felt the walls of her childhood home as a prison around her. "My darling, my love," she whispered hoarsely, and behind the thick dark lashes, her eyes were luminous with tears. Only for his sake had she returned to this

hated house. For his sake she would complete the task he had given her.

Beyond the garden the dusk darkened the fields and the line of birches on the horizon. Through the thick pane of glass Darya could feel the evening chill. Though the snows of winter no longer covered the ground, the earth was still drab and brown and barren. The oak tree was still there. It held its tortuous arms to the gray sky in sickening reminder of the humiliation she had endured that day, the memory of the horror that never left her. Her breasts felt the bite of the rough bark. Her back remembered the wrenching pain of the lash, her will still burned with hatred for the man who had dared to treat her with such contempt.

Suddenly a pain tore through her and she fell forward, clutching her stomach. Rising unsteadily, almost blinded by the pain, she found her way to the tall oak dresser, with groping fingers pulling open the top drawer. With elaborate care she lifted a small glass ampul out of the drawer and prepared a needle. Flinging back the skirt of her peignoir, she grasped the soft, yielding flesh of her thigh. With a moan she plunged the needle into her skin and drove the plunger home.

The blessed warmth that she had denied herself for so long suffused through Darya Ivanovna's veins, filling her body like a river of sunshine, touching her nerves with a soothing balm. The elation of the life-giving drug swept over her. It was miraculous, the stunning force of her need and the simplicity with which it could be satisfied. Only two things had the power to heal her so, this drug and the man whose words of love and hope would sustain her tonight.

Serene, self-possessed once more, Darya lifted the brilliant sapphire and the simple card from the rug where she had let them drop. Her reflection moved in the already darkened window, and she smiled at her own beauty with arrogant pride. Yes, she would bring Anton Voroshilov to heel. She would play him against the other one, Rogozhin, and let his jealousies drive him where she wanted him. Later, when she had obtained what she wanted, she would bring the mighty deputy of the Okhrana here. In her arms Anton Voroshilov would sign his love.

The small ormolu clock on the dresser chimed five o'clock. With a renewed anticipation for the evening ahead, Darya Ivan-



ovna rang for her maid. When Tamara Borislava appeared, red-faced and hesitant, once more she saw only the mask, the facade of impassive beauty that hid her mistress's passion from the world.



Anton Voroshilov had become too used to the role of the hunter to realize that he had slowly become the quarry. Voroshilov was an expert at detecting the smallest hint of weakness in other men and profiting from it. Yet he was blind to his own weakness, and still unaware that he was irrevocably snared in the oldest and most entangling of traps. Anton Voroshilov was a man consumed by jealousy.

With disarming grace Darya Ivanovna begged him to take the seat of honor at the head of the long table, while she herself would eat at the foot of the richly laid board. She smiled sweetly at him across the vast expanse of damask cloth and glittering crystal between them. Had she guessed that Voroshilov's presence here—ostensibly to discuss with Mitsenku more effective ways of purging the area of anarchists—was only a ploy, an excuse to be near her? As bewitched as he was by the countess, Anton Voroshilov admitted ruefully to himself that any excuse would have sufficed to bring him to Kolumna. But he had not left his official duties in St. Petersburg to be separated from Darya Ivanovna by a length of a table and a covey of chattering idiots, while he gazed at her like a poor foolish suppliant at an intolerably cruel distance.

Tapping his fingers impatiently on the stem of his glass, Voroshilov glanced down the long table with its candles blazing from heavy silver candelabra, reflected in the ornate sterling plate. He saw the smiling faces of two dozen ladies and distinguished gentlemen—the manicured, well-appointed seigniors of the province. All well, at ease, and comfortable as if the front had been a thousand miles away instead of beyond the green hills of Kolumna. How they bored him with their tiresome talk! His eyes returned to Darya Ivanovna. Her breasts swelled temptingly over the low décolleté of her gown. Long diamond earrings sparkled like fire around her face, the light of the flickering candles etched her cheekbones with shade and shadows. Her eyes were luminous as stars and her wide, generous mouth as sensually inviting as a ripe fig. Darya's gown was a muted, dusty shade of rose silk crepe, which set off her yellow hair and pale skin. A rope of diamonds twinkled at her breast.

And yet even as he dwelled upon Darya's beauty, Voroshilov saw that her own attention was fully engaged by a man he had not seen for some time. So she and Captain Rogozhin knew each other well, to judge by the easy, intimate manner in which they conversed together at the far end of the table, and the secret glances Darya cast at her escort. Now, with the sensation of suddenly snapping awake, he remembered that his last meeting with Rogozhin had been at the same party where he had met Darya Ivanovna.

The jarring realization that they were lovers shook the deputy of the Okhrana with the force of an earthquake. He set his glass down so sharply that drops of wine splattered the immaculate cuff of his sleeve. With a wrenching feeling, Voroshilov saw Darya Ivanovna bend forward at something Rogozhin said. She laughed, her sensual lips curving into a smile, and a hot pang of jealousy tore at Voroshilov's heart. Such rage filled him that the room around him distorted and only the vision of Darya Ivanovna and the young captain remained.

"Are you quite all right, your Excellency?" Madame Mitsenku chirruped solicitously, and Voroshilov realized that the shock of his anger had drained the blood from his face, leaving him ashen. With an uncharacteristic gesture he mopped his brow with the napkin. "Quite all right, I assure you, madame," he replied through frozen lips. "It is very warm, and I felt suddenly over-

come by the heat." He tried to smile, but it was more of a wince that twisted his lips.

He had been beset by the woman's incessant, irritating babbling at his elbow for an hour. Madame Mitsenku was only too aware that the seating arrangement which placed her beside the chief of the Okhrana acknowledged the importance of her husband's position, and thus her own. More than a little excited by the austere handsomeness of her dinner companion, the school-girl heart of the woman took her over.

Completely unaware that her coquetry was sorely missing the mark, Madame Mitsenku blushed prettily under her rouge and patted her hair, which had been painstakingly rinsed with starch water and appeared to have been carved out of stone.

Voroshilov had a twinge of pity for his subordinate. One could forgive almost anything of a man who was bound to this creature for the remainder of his mortal life. He watched with distaste as she speared a generous helping of *poullaller Versailles* with her fork and lifted it to her mouth with the grace of a field hand loading a hay wagon, not forgetting to crook her little finger in the process, nor to wipe her lips with the lace-edged napkin.

"Unbelievable," his companion now simpered in a sugary tone, "that such destruction could take place under the very noses of the guards and the police. Completely impossible to comprehend! His excellency, my own husband, spent many a sleepless night, I can tell you." She sighed suggestively like a superannuated schoolgirl. "The wife of an Okhrana official knows more about Russia than anyone thinks." She batted her eyelashes repeatedly. "We sacrifice a great deal for the work of our husbands and the well-being of our country, a great deal of personal sacrifice, but that is only to be expected. Perhaps I should write a book," she added, casting a coy glance at Voroshilov as he tried not to shudder at the idea of this creature transferring her debilitation into print. Better even incendiary tracts penned by scruffy anarchists, than this drivel on the printed page. With a little luck, she might choke on the claret, he thought wistfully.

"How I do go on," she gushed prettily. "Surely, Excellency, your wife must know so much about what really happens in Russia at night that she could fill volumes and volumes with very interesting accounts."

"I am not married," Voroshilov answered dryly, knowing even

as he said it that he had fallen into a trap. She would now try all avenues to discover the number of mistresses he had, and who they were. He looked hopefully to his left, thinking that the conversation there might rescue him from the not-too-subtle interrogation of Madame Mitsenku, but the lady at his side was not predisposed to light conversation. In despair, Voroshilov turned back to Mitsenku's babbling wife.

"My husband, Mitsenku, said to me, you let the army get in on it and they will botch the job, but what choice did he have under the circumstances? And he was right, your Excellency, for when they cornered these so-called saboteurs and anarchists, what did they do? They shot them. They cut them down, just like that, without even an hour of interrogation. Can you imagine such ineptitude, such stupidity? So how can we ever be sure that we have caught them? Perhaps they were not anarchists at all, or another band of saboteurs altogether. The girl, who was supposed to be with them, according to the reports, was never found." She shuddered theatrically. "A woman saboteur, your Excellency—have you ever heard of such a thing?"

Voroshilov smiled, and nodded without replying to this remark. An intriguing bit of information came back to him. There was evidence that the girl, Marina Lebedev, whose murder of Viktor Rogozhin had shocked St. Petersburg the previous fall, was the same girl who had been seen with Mikhail Zudin. Unconfirmed reports indicated that the girl might be close at hand, indeed even protected by one who under ordinary circumstances might be most desirous of seeing her in prison. His eyes studied the lean face of Sergei Rogozhin and a fascinating theory at once occurred to him. It would be most interesting to know what had become of Viktor's beautiful child bride.

With the woman talking on without the least notice that he paid her no attention, the deputy considered another, even more engrossing report whose contents had shocked him that morning. The subject of this report was Darya Ivanovna.

Aksinia, the old crone in the village, had talked at length. If the malevolent old hag were to be believed, Darya Ivanovna had lived out her imprisonment under her father's roof waiting only for the first chance to throw herself at a man. Fate had at last yielded up to her a trusted friend of her father's, who was spending a few weeks as the count's guest on the estate. "With no thought but her own wicked desires, using her beauty as a lure,

the girl persuaded the man to forget the hallowed bonds of friendship, the sacred ties of matrimony, and the rules of honor. The she-dog, that bitch, she would have lain down for the first leper that would have her."

The remainder of the agent's report was mercifully brief. Months later, when it became clear to all that Darya Ivanovna's transgression was to have undeniable consequences, the count went to his daughter's room to verify the reports. When he saw her swollen belly, he beat her and locked her up in her room. The old count summoned the village midwife and sent her into his daughter's room. The girl must be made clean again, he said. As to how his instructions were to be effected, he neither knew nor cared. The girl must be purged of the filth in her belly. Too afraid to protest, the old midwife bobbed a curtsy and went up to Darya Ivanovna. Her apron was stained with the blood of the butchered infant and its helpless, hate-filled mother when she bowed over the ringed hand of the count and said, "It is done."

The old woman's knife had cut too deeply. She emptied Darya's womb of the child in it, and of any hope of children. The cruel operation had rendered the beautiful, hot-blooded Darya barren, childless. No wonder she was so detached, so distant.

Voroshilov could not contain a shudder of revulsion, and for the first time the seriousness of his situation struck him. You are a fool, he warned himself, to show such weakness, to allow your thoughts to be commanded by a woman, to allow your feelings to be swayed by her. Tread cautiously, his instinct warned him.

"Don't worry, madame," he said, "I am quite sure that there are no longer any cadres of these bomb-throwers in the territory around Kiev. Your husband has outdone himself in his efforts, and I must say that his idea of employing troops of soldiers to smoke out the saboteurs was nothing less than genius. I myself am only here to bask in his reflected glory. You should be proud of him."

Madame Mitsenku's features regrouped into a look of smug self-satisfaction.

"But it is your husband who is most fortunate, madame. He is blessed with a wife who is as intelligent as she is beautiful and charming."

At that moment he was blessedly saved from further small talk by Darya herself. She rose regally from her place and led the

guests to an adjoining room. At last, Voroshilov could be by her side. There might even be a brief moment when they would be alone.

As for Sergei Rogozhin, his mind was a confusion of whirling thoughts as he rose from the table, Darya disappearing mysteriously to her rooms. He had long known that the essence of the liaison that bound him to Darya Ivanovna was carnal—he desired her, and as long as she welcomed him to her bed, he would go. Only a fool would turn down a chance to hold this woman in his arms. This had been true in Paris, in St. Petersburg, and it was still true now. Or was it? The exhilaration of holding Marina Lebedev, the intoxication of the afternoon, was still with him. And he loved her. At once the easy pleasure he had found in Darya Ivanovna's arms appeared shallow and ceased to interest him. Marina, he thought, wishing himself back in his own quarters with the slender dark-haired girl. How delicate she was, compared to Darya's opulent fullness. Marina's eyes were full of spark, of spirit; Darya's eyes were cold and dead. He had not noticed it before. Marina, her arms twisted around him, moaning softly under his caress.

Why had Darya Ivanovna invited him here with Anton Voroshilov? Had she seen the girl and divined a potential rival? Had she sold or—worse still—given the information to Voroshilov? My God, what had she done? Sergei Rogozhin had been aware of Voroshilov's eyes on him all throughout dinner. Why?

Voroshilov approached Sergei with a dangerous smile, hand outstretched.

"Deputy Voroshilov," Sergei greeted him with disarming charm. "You are very far from St. Petersburg tonight. The war must be getting very serious for our side, to bring you all the way down here."

"The war is not the immediate purpose of my visit, Captain," Voroshilov said smoothly. "Let us say, rather, that there is another sort of war than the one with the kaiser. A war in which you yourself have played a very impressive part, and one for which I wanted to thank you in person."

Voroshilov's eyes flickered over the captain, wondering if his theory about the Lebedev girl were right, sure that he would soon know. "The ambush. Good, very good. Very effective. We at the Okhrana are eternally in your debt, Captain."

"It was my pleasure to be of service, your Excellency," Sergei replied sarcastically.

"Only, there is a certain question which keeps bothering me. The matter of the girl, Marina Lebedev, I believe. She has never been found, is that correct, Captain?"

Sergei looked Voroshilov squarely in the eye. "No," he said without a second's hesitation. "We never found her." But in the denial, as emphatic as the slamming of a door, was an admission of the truth, and both men knew it.

Marina—Marina, with her hair around her face like curls of smoke—in the power of this man! No, I'll kill you if you touch her, Sergei swore to himself. His eyes locked with Voroshilov's, and under the veneer of their elegant manners, these men took the measure of each other. A silent understanding passed between them. The life of Marina Lebedev was the card they played.

Sergei studied the contents of his brandy snifter. Was it possible that Anton Voroshilov was actually in love with Darya Ivanovna, that this was something more than a passing fancy? The hell with Darya, Sergei thought, let her go. It was Marina he loved. Marina he wanted. And perhaps . . . As Voroshilov had sensed the deception, so Sergei now saw his foe's need, and Marina's salvation.

"My men and I would be most grateful, Excellency, if you could persuade General Babatsov that the services of the Don Cossacks would be better used on the battlefield than in the army camp."

"Your men are anxious to go into the fighting lines, Captain?"

"I am anxious," Sergei replied with marked emphasis. He would take Marina with him until she could get to safety.

As if he had read his thoughts, Voroshilov answered, "I will see what I can do."



## 19



"At last I have you to myself, my dearest Anton Voroshilov. My guest of honor, to whom I have been longing to speak all evening, and for whom my little heart beats so quickly in my breast," the countess purred in the warmth of her boudoir.

"You cannot expect me to believe that, Darya Ivanovna. Tonight you have had eyes only for Captain Rogozhin."

Darya Ivanovna laughed low in her throat. "Come, Anton. Is it possible that you care that Sergei Rogozhin is my lover? What difference can it make? Surely you are not prudish and narrow-minded." She turned and faced him squarely, her mocking green eyes never leaving his face. "If you only knew . . ." She laughed.

"But I do know, Darya," Voroshilov replied.

"What do you know, tell me, what do you know?" The line of her mouth hardened bitterly. "Ah, yes," she said, "the chief of the Okhrana would naturally have access to such details. Tell me, Anton Voroshilov, tell me, where did your men go to hunt up such information? To the gossips in the village, to soothsayers, or to the diaries of my dead mother?" Before Voroshilov could answer, she raised her hand to stop him. "Do you know, Anton, that all my life since I was a child, people have talked about me here in the village as well as in St. Petersburg. I have never lived

by the laws that they so worship without question. Do they tell your spies that I was the shame of my father's house? It is true, all true, Anton. I defied him then, and I defy him as he rots in his cold grave." Darya's cat eyes glittered with hard anger. "I care nothing for their rules, their laws, your laws. Do you know why they hate me, Anton? I am free!" She hesitated, her voice broke. "And when I met you, Anton . . ."

"You thought I too was above them, Darya? You were wrong. I am of them. Like them, I suffer envy, jealousy, the pain of love."

Darya Ivanovna filled two green crystal decanters with brandy. Her gestures were maddeningly slow and deliberate. She handed a glass to Vorshilov, coming so close to him that he felt as if the heat of her body was caressing his skin.

"Love, Anton? Even when you send your men to spy on me?"

He looked away. Her whispered words cut him deeply, wounding his hard pride more than any blow could have seared his flesh. A wave of shame swept over him. He felt soiled, like a trusted friend who is caught stealing and stands red-faced before the one he has betrayed, knowing even as he begs forgiveness that no exclamation will ever repair the damage he has wrought.

His fingers tightened on her arm, biting into her soft flesh. "Darya, Darya, forgive me," he whispered, his voice urgent in his despair. "I had to know. What man would not have done the same in my place? I have to know everything about you. Everything that you are, everything you have been, is sacred to me, a part of my own life, which waits only to be discovered. A memory I want to share with you, my darling, as I want to share all things—and of which the past is so small a part."

He pleaded with her as he had never pleaded with a woman, his voice low, his handsome dark features suddenly pale, haggard. All pride drained from his hard, strong face. "I beg of you, do not judge me harshly, my own darling. I will do anything you ask of me, only, Darya Ivanovna, give me back my life. Tell me, Darya, I beg of you, that I am forgiven!"

His voice died suddenly in his throat as he witnessed the startling effect on his beloved. Darya's green eyes were filled with tears. A red flush of shame and contrition had risen in her cheeks, and her lips quivered as the pale goddess fought to keep the composure that was so much a part of her. Darya lowered her tearstained eyes and sighed very deeply, her labored breath

cutting like a scourge across Voroshilov's heart. He could hear his pulses pound unmercifully as he waited with all the unendable anguish of a criminal in the docket who waits upon the verdict of the judge.

Darya Ivanovna unfolded her plan to Anton Voroshilov simply, without elaboration. The tears still glittered on her lashes as she said, "Our troops—Russian troops—are dying in terrible numbers. The French, the English, thousands of men screaming under the hail of German bullets. The war will become worse, Anton. Already there are no hospitals, no medicines, no opiates to quiet the agonies of the wounded." She continued, "Morphine is needed desperately, but the Turks are the ones who control its source, and they are allied with the Germans."

She trailed off, but already Voroshilov saw all, or nearly all, of the scheme she was about to propose. Yes, the dilemma of Turkey had not escaped his notice, and Anton Voroshilov was among a faction who had pleaded with the czar to turn away from the killing battle with Germany and retreat their forces into the vast plains of Russia, and in the period of grace that such a retreat would grant them, turn their might toward the weak and decadent defenses of Turkey. They would count on the plains and snows of Russia breaking the Germans where their ever-evaporating armaments were failing. For the risk they would get Constantinople, the morphine which was denied, the oil that lay untapped beneath the sands of Mesopotamia, and access to the sea. To capture the city on the Bosphorus was the one true hope of winning the war, and he was almost eager for the bargain that in a moment would be offered to him. He would accept it—he already knew that. And now he knew why she had returned, but it did not matter.

"Darya, I see already, yes. The Turks have morphine, and we need it. You have someone, someone who can get it. But there is a price, isn't there? There must be other than my pride, my love, of course. Or was that part of the bargain? What is it, Darya?"

"Anton," Darya said reproachfully, "how can you be so hard? This is an exchange. They want guns. The same men who control the flow of opium within Turkey are struggling for power. It is a civil struggle. They are not Russia's enemies, so you need not fear the bullets will be turned against our men."

"And you want me to supply the Turks, our enemies, with the guns that we need ourselves?"

"Not supply. After all, you yourself have nothing to do with the weapons. They are not your concern. Your part in the affair is only to turn your back, to let them slip over the border. In other words, to occupy yourself with more important matters."

"Such as . . . ?" Voroshilov asked bitingly. He was mad not to leave, to stay and listen to her. He had known the price of Darya Ivanovna's love would be high, but he had not reckoned on this. What she wanted came down to a betrayal of his principles—a deliberate breach of national security. What if the Turkish army patrols were to come upon the guns crossing into Turkey—for their own insurgents—and just hurl them against Russia? The very guns that he, Anton Voroshilov, the head of the trusted, vigilant Okhrana, had let slip into Turkey, turned against the imperial eagle?

Darya saw him hesitate, and with a low sigh she pulled her head back, showing him the white satin of her throat. How beautiful she was, how desirable. He had never wanted a woman as he wanted her. No woman had ever bewitched him as Darya Ivanovna bewitched him.

Darya settled herself on the blue silk couch, fluffing the soft pillows behind her. "Morphine, Anton, supplies of morphine in return for closing your eyes at the right time."

"I have one condition to your offer, Darya."

"Yes?" the blond purred languorously.

"My own men shall accompany the caravan across the Caucasus. Agreed?"

Darya shrugged, as if the question was no longer of any interest. "Of course, my dear Anton Voroshilov. If you wish. But who would you send on such a dangerous mission? Such a risky mission," she added with pointed emphasis.

It was Voroshilov's turn to appear indifferent. "A man I can trust. A man with something to hide, or someone to protect. And a man, my dear, whom I am sure you would not happily see shot by a stray bullet of one of your friend's men." A man such as Captain Rogozhin, he thought with satisfaction.

Darya gave no sign that she understood. The matter was closed. "As you wish, my darling," she said softly. She patted the blue cushion beside her. Her green eyes sparkling, she gazed at Voroshilov, letting him see what she desired. "Come here," she commanded.

Marina stared at the rough plank ceiling above her; elation and a deep sense of peace flooded over her. She loved Sergei, she belonged to him. He had sworn, with his head buried in her breasts and his arms around her, that he loved her, and she believed him. Marina thought of her mother, the passionate Tatiana. Was it for love like this that she had faced scorn and cruelty? Was it for this that her father turned his back on his own people? Yes, she understood now what their passion must have been, like the passion she felt for Sergei. All at once the world was a blessed place; the war and all the pain she had suffered receded into the far distance. A story read long ago in a forgotten book. In his arms she found love and a trust that protected her from all dangers.

She dressed quickly in the chilly night, her fingers fumbling at the buttons of her tunic. In the battered tin plate that served as Sergei's shaving mirror, she contemplated her face, wishing for a bright ribbon to tie in her tousled curls. Sighing with disappointment, she realized that even the new light in her eyes could not disguise the ill-shaped clothes that did little to display her femininity. If only I had a dress to wear, she thought mournfully, remembering her girlhood frocks with nostalgic regret. A red silk dress, close-fitting to set off her small waist and discreetly draw attention to her softly swelling bosom. She wished to be beautiful for him, richly dressed, carefully coiffed, and jeweled. Her cheeks would be lightly rouged, her lips redly inviting, her arms an invitation that would soon make him forget any world but the one they would create together in their passionate loving.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she moved about the small cantonment. How long it had been since she had felt such joy. The blankets folded, Marina spied the bedlam on the rough desk at the far end. The empty bottle, a pistol, a litter of maps and other papers, offended her sight, and with a blind happy energy she moved to the task. The maps, with their lines and markings of battalions and regiments, meant nothing to her now. She picked one up to fold it, and from beneath it fluttered a half-folded sheet of letter paper. Marina bent to pick it up, glancing at Sergei's writing as she did so.

"Dearest Darya," it began, and her blood ran cold, her eyes scanning the note through a blinding film of tears that she could not banish. Words of endearment, of intimate passion, seared her as she read. And then with horror she saw the one name which

would forever destroy that which had so briefly lived between them: ". . . I shall be delighted to pay my respects to Anton Voroshilov. Just as it has been my pleasure to round up his rowdy anarchists for him. Should I demand a bounty? My only price is one . . ."

The half-finished note ended there. Marina pushed aside the papers in front of her, revealing the invitation that sealed the hateful conspiracy. So he had gone to Darya, and gone also to Marina's enemy. How many hours had it been since he had betrayed her to Voroshilov, how many hours since he had caressed Darya's skin? Were they coming for her even now? A bounty!

He had deceived her with his vows of love. Still under the spell of the blond countess, cruelly he had used her, knowing that soon he would be rid of her, that she would be thrust into Voroshilov's dungeons or marched before the firing squad.

She hated him, but it was herself she hated far worse. She was a fool to believe him, to be deceived by his kisses that weakened her will. Now the thought of facing those gray eyes filled her with disgust. And the world outside lay in wait in all its dangers. Her only safety now was in flight, flight from this horrible betrayal. With a scream of rage, and with pain swelling unbidden from her breast, Marina turned and fled forever from the cossack camp.



Marina ran, heedless of the direction of her flight, her journey uncharted and at the mercy of fate. All that mattered was to put as much distance between herself and Sergei Rogozhin as possible. Like so many other nameless travelers fleeing through the war-bloodied plains of southern Russia, she left her past behind as she was caught up in the maelstrom of the war. She crossed the battle-scarred foothills of the Carpathians and followed the mountains, traveling southward. She must leave Russia, even if it meant risking the dangers of the battle lines, even if it meant braving the open danger of Austrian territory.

Marina forced herself to remember that Sergei had killed Mikhail and betrayed her. She was haunted by visions of him with Darya Ivanovna, yet the memory of his arms around her still troubled Marina's dreams. When she slept, she felt his hands on her, and she awoke calling his name.

She traveled south toward the Roumanian border and the sun. The countryside was dotted with burnt-out shells of farmhouses and villages through which battalions of soldiers had passed like a plague of locusts. She passed fields that had been burned and salted—a defiant greeting to the looting enemy armies. Now the roads were filled with bands of vagrants—women and ragged

children—hungry, haggard, and strangely silent. Their faces were as gray as the new corpses that lay abandoned by the roadsides. There was no time for burials; hardly a moment for a whispered farewell.

Marina's tunic and her woolen trousers hung around her in tatters. The chill wind bit through to her skin, and in vain she pulled the soiled, faded cloth around her for warmth. The soles of her boots were worn paper-thin and the rain seeped through, soaking her feet. At times the quiet of the forest ceased to be a refuge and became only a weight that pressed upon her heart. Then she traveled the open road, searching out bands of other refugees for company. In the camps at night they told tales of the advancing army's massacres. In Galicia the conquering troops had spared neither woman nor child, putting entire villages to the sword, shooting the men and setting the houses to the torch. Women were raped, then tortured and killed by slow degrees by the victorious armies.

Marina remembered her journey to Kiev and shuddered. How long had it been since she had felt safe, protected from the nightmare of this war? Only a few hours, and they had cost her all her pride.

The wave of refugees swelled before the momentum of the advancing Austrian troops. "The soldiers are coming. Pack up your things, leave your homes!" was the cry. The airplanes of the enemy were seen weaving through the skies, casting black shadows over the hill. Without protest, thousands turned south to safety.

In the second month of her flight she crossed an abandoned battlefield where lay the charred hulk of an Austrian tank, overturned like a giant insect. The jagged turret had torn a gaping hole in the ravaged land. A thin wisp of blue-gray smoke breathed from the twisted entrails of the tank, the stench of burned flesh assailed Marina's nostrils. Oh, God, she thought with horror, to die like that. The tank seemed to her a monument to death, the Russian mortar beside it a tribute to senseless killing. The sweet scent of death permeated the air like a sickening perfume. Marina's stomach wrenched, and she felt ill.

Marina stumbled toward the tank, horrified and fascinated by the ghoulish machine. Her fingers traced the dents where the bullets glanced off the metal armor. Here the mortar shell had torn through the base of the turret, exploding the machine from the inside, turning it into a flaming hell box. The power of this aw-



ful, massive death instrument overwhelmed her. No longer could she block the reality of the horrors that awaited her over the very next hill, beyond the next valley, wherever her luck would give out and she would fall into Austrian hands.

Marina fell to her knees in the blackened earth beside the tank, her eyes filled with hot, salty tears. This was the truth behind the patriotic speeches of the generals, behind the idle chatter of jeweled women who rolled bandages for the troops while they worried about their next charity ball. This was Russia, the land of blood and empty fields, not the storybook Russia of the Romanovs. This land was called mother, father, protector, and life-giver. Did they know that Russia was a woman, ravaged, raped, tortured, and betrayed? Did they know that through her wounds seeped the lifeblood of an empire and a people? How many times had these same fields been laid to waste, spoiled, defiled, the earth glutted with the bodies of nameless dead? Still, when peace returned, they bore fruit and offered sustenance as they always had. The men might perish, but the land would endure. I will endure, I have been uprooted and betrayed, Marina sobbed, but I too will endure.

Marina wiped her eyes and scrambled to her feet. She had had enough of horror, of tales of pain and killing. The cool air of the night filled her lungs, and she breathed deeply. The sky was streaked with clouds that moved ominously lower, like dark spirits over her head. Marina pulled her shirt tighter around her. She must travel fast, and she could travel faster alone.

Marina walked all night, until the sky pinked with the first rays of sunlight. She was approaching a large town nestled against the rolling foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Hunger stabbed at her like knives in her gut. Perhaps she could beg for some food here, a bowl of milk . . .

As she approached the center square, an old instinct warned Marina of danger. A pack of mange-eaten dogs, bone-thin and as starved and vicious as wolves, came at her out of the shadows. Marina backed against a wall. The leader approached, baring teeth which glistened like fangs. She kicked at him, and he retreated. Without turning her back, she moved away, until the dogs were gone from sight.

When she came to the square, she gasped in horror. Black rifles slung over the shoulders of their green uniforms, the Austrian patrol held the sleepy-eyed villagers at gunpoint. Torn from

their beds without a second's warning, they shivered in the chill morning air. They were lined up side by side against the white wall of the church, less than two hundred souls at the mercy of these armed foreigners.

Marina huddled back into the safety of the shadows. A tall officer swept into the square, the handle of his riding crop tapping against his calf. His carriage was erect, arrogant. A man of unquestioned authority, walking slowly past the line of villagers, examining their faces one by one, as if he expected his gaze to yield up an answer. At last he concluded his inspection.

"Corporal Hofzinger."

"Yes, Herr General Von Malkan." A soldier stepped forward and at once snapped to attention.

The campaign medals glistened on the general's broad chest. "Does anyone know who is responsible for the lives of the two men who died last night? Does anyone know," he asked very distinctly, so that everyone in the square heard him, "who is responsible for the grenade that took the lives of two Austrian soldiers last night?"

The square remained completely quiet, the faces of the villagers blank and impassive.

"Very well, Corporal, proceed. Count them out," the general ordered briskly, not wishing to waste any more time on the matter. Calmly he observed his soldier count out the villagers by tens, bringing each tenth man, woman, or child forward. Without a flicker of emotion, he watched the doomed people stagger forward into the whining bullets of Austrian machine guns.

The distance between the outskirts of the village and the far side of the mountain was a journey of six or seven hours, if one new the territory. Marina covered it in less than four hours, leaving the houses and the memory of what she had just witnessed far behind her. She ran until she was out of breath, only slowing her pace when the stabbing pains at her ribs made her slack her pace. She climbed around the base of the mountain, working her way toward the crown and to the side that did not face the village. Nothing mattered but that she put as much distance as she could between herself and the hard, cold-eyed general.

Swiftly as a deer she ran, never once looking over her shoulder for fear of what she might see. That night she rested, waking early to move on again. In the afternoon of the second day she

came to an abandoned house set far back in the woods. Cautiously she peeked through the door, and when she was satisfied that she was alone, she looked around the cabin. The two rooms were bare, stripped hurriedly. Nothing remained but an overturned table, a broken oil lamp, and a suitcase. With a kick, Marina turned the suitcase over, and an old cotton dress tumbled out. Marina looked at it in bewilderment. The black cotton was faded, the edges of the skirt hemmed with tattered colored ribbons. But to her it appeared as beautiful as a French ball gown. In an instant she had stripped off her own rags and was pulling the dress over her head. The bodice laced up the front and fastened with bright yellow ribbons. She twirled in delight. If only she had a glass to peer into! The soft skirt swirled softly around her legs. Tossing her tattered uniform aside, Marina gave herself up to the long-forgotten delight of wearing women's clothes.

In the morning, dressed in her new attire, Marina left the cabin in search of a stream. Her new dress had made her too conscious of the lost luxuries of St. Petersburg. She ached to feel cool, clear water on her skin, to wash away all the traces of the mud and dust that clung to her skin. At last she came to a stream that widened and ran into a natural basin before plunging down the side of the mountain. She kicked off her boots and flung her dress aside. In an instant, the cold fresh water braced against her skin. With delicious abandon Marina let herself sink into the stream. She was a child again, a carefree, laughing girl on holiday in Finland with her parents. Not until she felt a rough hand on her wet, naked shoulder did she realize that she was not alone.

The soldier half-dragged, half-carried her out of the water. She wriggled against him, as slippery as a fish, but he held her tight, bruising her bare arms.

"Look what I've found in the stream," he called to the other soldiers with him. He flung Marina on the bank, holding her down by pressing his boot against her back. One of the men pushed back his cap and whistled in admiration. "A good day's work," he said. "But let's have a closer look."

She was dragged to her feet. One held Marina's hands behind her back and wrapped his hand through her hair so she could not move her head. The first soldier, his hands wet and cold against her skin, stroked her bare breasts. His hands roamed down the white expanse of her belly and pried her thighs apart.

A grin spread slowly over his face, a leer that revealed cracked, yellow teeth. Marina screamed and struggled as he fumbled with the buttons of his jacket and unsnapped his belt, but the man behind her held her fast. He cursed and pinned her to the ground, holding her down by the shoulders while his companion gripped her ankles and pulled her legs apart. The first man straddled her, pushing into her with savage force. Pain ripped through Marina's naked body. Unmoved by her screams, the soldier used her with unrelenting brutality. Again and again he plunged into her, his thrusts quicker and harder. Then the world turned black and she fainted.

She awoke to the sound of a rifle shot. Someone lay slumped across her, the full weight of his body on her. "Here." Someone pulled the dead soldier from her and lifted her to her feet. With tears coursing down her cheeks, she allowed an unknown hand to pull her black dress over her shaking shoulders and fasten the stays of her bodice. A tall fair-haired man in the black tunic of an Austrian flier patted her hair into place. A sling cradled his left shoulder.

"It is over, Fräulein, all over," he said soothingly. He held her tightly as she cried helplessly against his chest. "It's over, it's over," he kept repeating, until at last Marina's tears subsided.

"Who are you?"

"That should be my question, Fräulein. What are you doing here alone in the forest, bathing by a stream, as if these mountains were a pleasure resort? Don't you know that you are in the Austrian lines? You were running away from them, were you not?" He smiled suddenly, his strong pale face young beneath its thatch of yellow hair. "A foolish way to escape. Now it seems I have as much to fear from the Austrians as you do." He indicated the dead soldier with a wave of his revolver. "After this, I am less likely to survive an Austrian encounter than you are."

Marina blinked uncomprehendingly. Seeing she did not understand, he said, "I am a deserter, my dear Fräulein. A man as sick of war as you must be. Who are you?"

In a shaky voice Marina mumbled her name.

"Lieutenant Albrecht Von Viebahn, at your service," the flier said. He clicked his heels in a parody of Austrian military etiquette. In spite of herself, Marina giggled.

The flier looked relieved. If she could laugh, she was not as

hurt as he first feared. "And where are you off to, Marina Lebedev?" he asked.

"To Roumania. South. Out of Russia."

The tall blond man looked at her darkly. "Alone?"

Marina nodded. "Yes, alone," she replied.

Lieutenant Albrecht Von Viebahn looked at the dark, tousle-haired girl in her black cotton dress. Perfect prey for bands of scavenging soldiers. If she fell into the hands of the patrols, this—and worse—awaited her. "I am headed for Sarajevo. You will come with me," he said shortly.

Von Viebahn and Marina had left the comparative safety of the woods for the open path, a welcome respite from the treacherously steep underfooting of the forest, which hampered their steps at every turn and slowed them in their flight away from the front lines.

The stream was two days behind them when they were stopped by an armed patrol guard. The guard overtook them on his powerful cavalry mount. Reining to a stop, he pointed the muzzle of his carbine at the travelers and demanded roughly to see their travel permit. Sunlight gleamed brightly on the bayonet fixed on the end of the gun, and Marina wondered with a feeling of dread how many lives had ended on the point of this blade. She shrank back, but Von Viebahn shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"We have no identification," he said. "A party of deserters came upon us a few days ago. They took everything we had, including our papers." He lied with easy guile.

The soldier pushed his cap wearily to the back of his head. Two more dirty, nameless vagabonds, he thought. With a glance he took in Albrecht's tattered, soiled uniform. Stolen off an Austrian corpse, no doubt. He could see this man and his wife gleefully stripping the corpse of his brother in arms. Filthy scum, the guard raged inwardly. Defiling a soldier's body. Cold fury swelled around his heart. They might not even have waited for the Austrian to die, ambushing him, killing him themselves, and robbing their victim. Yes, the fellow's arm was bound with a bloodstained strip of linen at the shoulder—the Austrian must have put up a fight.

The guard raised his gleaming rifle in the air. "Filthy thieves!" He swung the gun in a wide arc, the tip of the bayonet pointed a

fraction of an inch above Albrecht's heart. The guard cocked the rifle with a snap. Sensing the excitement of his master, the soldier's horse suddenly tossed back its head and reared up on its hind legs, pawing the air. The soldier was thrown off balance for the fatal fraction of a second, the point of the rifle trembled indecisively. Albrecht jerked his revolver out of his belt and shot. Without a sound, the soldier swayed crazily in the saddle and crashed to the ground. In an instant, Albrecht had the horse by the bridle.

"Pick up the gun," he commanded. "And check his pockets for money."

Marina obeyed swiftly, handing the heavy gun to Albrecht and rifling the dead man's pockets. Some scraps of chocolate paper, a bar of soap, and a tattered letter postmarked from a German city completed the personal effects of the dead man. From the breast pocket of the uniform jacket she pulled a small purse with a few notes and a handful of coins inside. Albrecht flashed her a grim smile. "Good," he said shortly. "He left us almost all of his pay. Come."

At night they rode the dark roads, heading toward Serbia, where the Bulgarians held sway. When the sky was clear, the moon painted the narrow ribbon of road a pale silver. Albrecht and Marina rode past abandoned villages, where the gutted houses stood silhouetted darkly against the bright sky. The kaiser's men had been thorough—nothing that could be taken remained: porches torn to shreds for easy firewood, chickens and pigs routed from the barnyards to feed the hungry conquerors, the gardens stripped down to the last parsnip. Bits of furniture, an embroidered hassock, a treasured feather tick, a carved chest with its drawers flung out around it, lay where they had been dragged by the looters. All was a poignant reminder of the Austrian might.

The Bulgarians would not be interested in a Russian criminal, nor in an Austrian deserter. The Bosna River was a natural thoroughfare to the Balkan city of Sarajevo, the birthing place of the holocaust which had transformed their lives. Later there would be time to take stock and plan what would come next. For now, all that mattered was to leave the front as far behind them as possible.

In the hail of ground fire that downed his plane, a bullet had hit Albrecht in the arm and torn through the flesh of his shoul-

der, digging under the collarbone and ripping out through his back. He dismissed the growing pain casually and attributed his increasing weakness to the lack of food, but Marina realized that the soiled bandage hid a serious wound that was not healing. If the wound were left unattended, it might well cost him his life. Summoning up all her courage, Marina at last confronted the taciturn fair-haired man.

"Here," she said, "let me take off the bandage." Too weary to protest, Albrecht allowed her to unwrap the soiled cloth bandage that bound the wound. Marina gasped.

The skin around the wound had deepened to a purplish gray, the flesh was covered with an iridescent, poisonous white film, like spoiled meat. She braced herself against a wave of nausea.

"It is nothing," she said lightly, hiding her fear. "I have seen worse." Stealing herself, she cut away the old bandage and bathed the wound. Marina tore a strip of cloth from the hem of her ragged petticoat and wrapped it carefully around the infected shoulder, wishing that for this one moment she was back in Viktor's well-stocked household in St. Petersburg. What she would have given for a vial of apothecary's spirits, alcohol, or even a glass of vodka to pour on the wound and feel that at least something, however slight, had been done to help the infection. Albrecht's eyes burned with fever, and he stifled an involuntary cry of pain when she touched the swollen flesh around the bullet wound.

He could not last more than a few days like this. Marina remembered Mikhail's tales of hardship in Siberia, the makeshift butchers who passed as surgeons for the prisoners. There had been a man in one of those wards, with an infected knee, doomed to lose his leg to gangrene if he was not operated on. But the doctor, butcher-surgeon that he was, contrived to save both the man's leg and his life using nothing more than a knife and alcohol to kill the infection so that the wound might heal properly. But without the cleansing, what use was the knife?

Marina rose to her feet decisively. A spark of hope burned again in her breast.

She looked into the sick man's brilliantly feverish eyes. "Listen, Albrecht," she whispered. "You must rest. I am going away now. I will take the horse, but I will come back for you before dark," she promised blindly. Did the sick man hear her words,

was he even aware of her? But Albrecht managed a brief nod of his head.

Near Visegrad, a small hamlet they had passed earlier, she came to a small farm where an emaciated pony was tethered to the ramshackle gate. The ribs of the dispirited nag showed through his mangy coat. Not a rich place, but at least inhabited. Marina reined her horse to a stop, slipped from the saddle, and ran up to the sagging porch. She beat her fists on the door, "Is there anybody there?" she shouted.

With infinite caution the door opened and a woman Marina's age peered out at her from red-rimmed eyes. The horror and fear in the girl's face reminded Marina with a start how strange she must look, disheveled and scrawny, her cheeks gaunt and her hair in wisps around her face. A startling sight, for certain. But surely this woman, this mournful creature, had seen other sights to make this one seem harmless.

Marina thrust her foot forward as the woman tried to push the door shut. "I need a bottle. A bottle of alcohol, vodka, spirits, diluted kerosene, anything you have. Please, I will pay you." A faint light flickered across the woman's thin features when she saw the purse Marina waved before her. Then she shook her head dully. "No, we have nothing left," she said.

"Please," Marina entreated her. "There must be something hidden somewhere. Ask the men. Please, good lady, I will pay them for it." The woman's eyes watched the purse greedily. Again she shook her head, revealing a nearly toothless mouth. "No men," she said, and she began to laugh, her thin body rocking back and forth. "Aieeee, aieeee," she cried, overcome with a senseless mirth. "The war has come. The men have gone. Go away, little lady. Go to the village. But go quickly, before they come back." Grinning, she raised her hands in a mock salute, and Marina saw that the fingers of her right hand were gone. Red sores glistened where they had been chopped away. "Look, look. I did not run fast enough into the forest," and the poor maimed creature laughed eerily.

"Where is the village?" Marina shouted at the laughing woman. The creature's faded blue eyes brimmed with tears of mirth. She pointed ahead to the road and waved past her farm. Marina backed away, frightened by the mad light in the woman's eyes and the covetous glances that she threw at the purse. The woman raised her bleeding stump of a hand.



"Here." Marina flung the purse at her and fled. She would have to steal the vodka now.

Strange figures thronged through the streets of the village on the Serbian border. Here were men and women of a proud mountain race. They were tall, stately, and they had the dignity and bearing of a people who hold pride above poverty, peace and the easy comforts of a compromising subservience. The women walked gracefully, in their full embroidered skirts, their bodies unhampered by the corsets of the rich. The men were dark, high-cheekboned, and slenderly built, with piercing dark eyes. Small wonder that the Austrian power sat uneasily here. This hard soil spawned army after army of rebels who resisted all foreign power.

Marina slipped as unobtrusively as she could among the crowd of women bargaining with the fruit vendor. Like them, she touched and weighed in her hand the pomegranates and grapes which glistened like jewels in the sun. Her mouth watered for a taste of the fruit, but the eyes of the merchant were sharp and she did not dare tempt fortune. Regretfully she continued to push her way through the crowd, her eyes sweeping the stalls.

Then she saw what she wanted. A melon vendor stood extolling his wares, and behind him, half-hidden by the wheel of his wagon, he had propped a bottle which he took so many pains to hide that Marina guessed immediately what the bottle contained.

With an easy gesture the melon vendor picked up a melon and opened the green globed fruit with a single sweep of the curved knife. Marina's eyes never left his hand. She watched, fascinated, almost hypnotized by hunger as he brandished the halved melon aloft, tempting the buyers. How juicy, how golden the flesh of the melon was! But it was not food she was after. She waited until the merchant turned away, and with the speed of a thieving Gypsy closed her fingers around the throat of the bottle and concealed it in the folds of her skirt. Praying that the sharp-eyed trader would not miss his bottle and remember the dark girl wandering past his wagon, Marina forced herself to walk deliberately back to her mount. With the air of a woman who has successfully concluded an afternoon of bartering at the village fair, Marina turned her horse back down the road. She trotted the horse easily until the village faded behind her. Then she dug her heels into the horse's flanks. "Run!" she shouted. "Run!"

Albrecht's face was gray with pain, his eyes were closed, and he lay so quietly that for a minute Marina thought she had returned too late to save him. She knelt by him, touching his straw-colored hair with frozen fingers. How weary he looked!

"Albrecht, Albrecht . . ." she whispered frantically. To her infinite relief, she saw his eyelids flutter open. He tried to speak as he looked at her in dazed disbelief. "Drink this," Marina said. She held the bottle to his lips. He looked up at her. "You came back," he said simply, as though he had never believed she would return.

"Drink," she said, raising the bottle to his lips. Holy Mother, come to my aid. Help me do this, and don't let him suffer. This Austrian, this enemy, saved my life. Please let me save his.

Trying to appear as calm as she could, Marina took the curved knife from her waist. She ran the knife through a flame to clean it. Then she bent over him.

She pressed the blade of the knife into Albrecht's shoulder and sliced open the infected wound. The smell of putrefying flesh hit her full force. With detached fascination she watched her hands cut the stranger's flesh. The wound looked clean now, big but free from the gangrenous gray-white growth. She had felt Albrecht's body stiffen against the pain, she had felt him grit his teeth against the screams that rose in his throat, and now she was profoundly grateful when his body went limp and he slipped into the opiate of unconsciousness.

Marina poured the vodka into the naked gaping wound. She cracked a match and held it above the drenched wound. The liquid ignited, and a translucent blue flame danced over the torn skin. The smell of burning flesh filled Marina's nostrils as the flames on Albrecht's skin flickered and went out. Marina turned her head aside and retched.

For three days they remained at the camp while the fever raged through Albrecht's body. Marina kept a vigil beside the small campfire, watching helplessly as he wavered between life and death, sponging the burn in his shoulder with a damp cloth and piling all the clothes and blankets they had over him when the cold racked his body with spasms.

It was when the fever burned in him, when the sweat ran down his gaunt face in rivulets, and the throbbing pain in his shoulder made him writhe in agony that Albrecht sank into

nightmares and delirium. Marina heard him cry out once in the midst of his agony, but she could not make out the words that escaped his paralyzed lips. She soothed him as tenderly as she could, hushing him into sleep. By the third night in the camp the glassy opaqueness of his eyes that had so frightened her had gone, and the ashen pallor left his face. He would live. But she still did not know this stranger whose life had become bound with her own.



Baron Albrecht Von Viebahn came from a remarkable family, famous both for the beauty of its women and for the courage of its men. The elder baroness, Albrecht's mother, had been celebrated in all of Austria for her pale skin, which, as one observer put it, "had the exquisite delicacy of a fine enamel." The young men vied for her attention, and even the hardened, more businesslike elders had to concede that with such beauty, such vivacity and wit, the sticky question of her small dowry paled in importance.

Lisette Von Kronstat ut Marne married well indeed, snatching the young Baron Wilhelm Von Viebahn from under the very noses of the ambitious debutantes. The young man was titled, and related by blood to the imperial family; he was handsome in a dignified, soldierly way; and he was staggeringly rich—and she loved him. For his part, Wilhelm Von Viebahn had waited thirty-five years to give his heart to a woman, and the moment he laid eyes upon the impecunious beauty, he knew that his patience had been rewarded.

Baron Wilhelm Von Viebahn had three loves—the army, his country, and his wife, in that order. He came from a long line of soldiers, brave warriors hailed by their emperors as pillars of the

empire, and his own temperament, conservative, loyal, and naturally dignified, made the strictly stratified army a natural career. He loved the land of his birth because it was an integral part of his heritage, and therefore a part of himself. And he loved his young, captivating bride with a jealous ardor, forsaking his elegant mistresses and the pastimes of the officers' clubs to be by her side.

Having thus divided his passions for army, country, and wife, Wilhelm Von Viebahn had little love to spare for his only son. Thus Albrecht approached manhood without the elder Von Viebahn making a serious attempt to deepen his acquaintance with his son.

It came as somewhat of a shock to his father when Albrecht, eighteen, and already a cadet in the Imperial Army, announced his ambitions to be a flier. The baron's face paled with shock.

"My son," he boomed angrily in the sanctuary of his library, "is it possible that I must remind you that your forefathers have always been army men? The Von Viebahns have always gone into the army. And as for this newfangled sport, which is used to entertain the masses at the fairground and circuses, I cannot believe that any son of mine would consider such a debasing pastime. I forbid it."

The younger Von Viebahn watched his father with unflinching eyes. "How can I tell you what it is like to fly, to be borne aloft on the wind and watch the earth recede beneath you, and the clouds come rushing out of the sky to greet you? Do you know what it is to ride suspended thousands of feet above the earth, and see this land, which you love so much, spread out for you like a child's toy village? Fields of wheat and rye laid out neatly side by side like pieces on a gaming board, the lakes shining like bits of glass, mirroring the sky, the mountains more rugged and beautiful than you have ever seen them." Albrecht's eyes shone with enthusiasm. "And the risk, the love of danger, the knowledge that at any moment, without warning, the miracle of flight may be snatched from you, and you may be smashed to the earth! You are alone in the sky, alone with only your airplane and your wits."

In the end they had compromised—Albrecht promising to make his life in the army provided he was free to pursue his passion for airplanes and aviation. He became a skilled flier, and

with the advent of the war, he was given the rank of lieutenant and officially pronounced a member of the army air corps. The steadfast rebellion which had won the battle with his father over the choice of career was the last major turning from the path that life had chosen for him. He had brought honor to the Von Viebahn name with his swift rise in the air corps. Besides career, a marriage to a woman of high station and refined beauty was also expected of him. This second duty Albrecht Von Viebahn undertook without protest, conducting a courtship that was swift and determined.

But he soon learned that Lisle, aside from the softness and tempting pallor of her flesh, her pretty face, and the happy accident of her noble birth, had little to offer to him in the ways of love. She lived for her beauty; even the expression of a husband's love and the risk of childbearing—which would ruin her figure—were hardly tolerated. Lisle was cold, she was vain, and in her presence Albrecht was always bored and usually impatient.

From the woman he had never loved he turned to the only passion of his life—the freedom of the skies. It mattered little to him what became of Lisle, what lies she told about him to their former friends, not even that a month after he had been ordered to join his squadron he received a letter from her, full of pious regrets. The old baron wrote to his son in a tone of grudging forgiveness that did not touch Albrecht. They would never understand the beauty that he had found, the freedom and the power that he knew, the ecstasy that made him whole.

All his passion drove him into the sky, to brave the dangers of flying, the added danger of machine-gun fire, poisoned gas, and the planes of the faceless enemy. Intoxicated by the ballet of aerial war, Albrecht found a thrilling peace in the clouds. The man-against-man corridas as the planes chased each other through the cloud banks and over foreign battlegrounds appealed to his romantic senses. The decals on the wing of his plane, each representing an enemy plane torn out of the sky in an honorable death, were a source of pride, a mark of his skill and his courage. They told the world that he was one of Austria's ace pilots, the bravest of her brave young men. He was drunk on the thrill of the fight, and he knew that the men he fought were as hardy and proud as he was, an elite already with its own legends, its own code of honor, detached from and above the battle that raged senselessly below.

When had the doubts, the truth, begun to tear away at this romantic image that he carried of himself? Even from so far above the battle, Albrecht could not believe in his own purity forever. He saw the gutted, ruined land from his plane, he watched streams of refugees flee the advance of the Austrian armies; he watched soldiers shoot civilians down in cold blood, without respect to sex or age. And worst of all, he saw the victims of this holocaust. He saw men who trembled and babbled incoherently or stared dully into space because the holy war had, at long last, broken their nerves. Albrecht saw the hard, dead look in the eyes of women who had been raped so often that they no longer differentiated between one uniform and another—all men were to be feared.

He understood that horror had corrupted them all. In the name of honor and patriotism, the same sentiments that emblazoned the crest of the Von Viebahn house, the peoples of Europe endured a nightmare of iron and fire. In the name of honor men raped women and emptied their revolvers in the bellies of children. With patriotic pride the nations vied in the invention of death devices—cold steel-corded bullets to rip through the sandbags and parapets of the trenches; *Minenwerfer*, projectiles that could wipe out whole trenches. German asphyxiating gas, French phosphorous bombs, the picric bombs of the British. *Yperite*, which could poison an entire area of land for days on end if the wind did not shift, contaminating clothing and corroding flesh, unanimously adopted for use by all the armies.

This was their honor and their pride. They had turned Europe into a vast killing ground, a laboratory of death.

There were no heroes in this war. Only dupes who had become inured to the despicable act of murder. Traitors who ravaged and despoiled the earth they professed to love. The true heroes were the priests who walked steadily, fearfully through the random artillery barrages to give comfort to strangers who had come to kill and now lay dying with fear in their eyes. The heroes were the children who huddled together as the bombs reverberated outside the walls of their darkened rooms. The heroes were the women who fought against the degrading violence of rape. In all of Europe, the heroes faced the killers. Albrecht knew he had become one of the killers.

When he volunteered for the most dangerous missions available, his commanding officer saw the dead-blank fury in Al-

brecht's eyes, and he knew what it meant. He had seen it before: there was no cure. Without a word, he assigned Albrecht to reconnaissance, in which pilots risked low flying missions over Russian territory. If they were fortunate, they would return with information: location of field pieces, movements of infantry, size of supply camps. But it was dangerous. The planes flew so low that the wings would skim to the tops of the trees, a gust of wind could send the fragile metal bird skidding into the boughs of the fir trees. A burst of ground fire from a machine gun, a bullet from an enemy plane flying above; Albrecht knew of the peril in this assignment, and he welcomed it. Stripped of the illusions that had sustained him so long, he pursued death with a steeled fury. Yet it was almost as if his rage protected him; again and again he soared into the sky, the engine throbbing under him, braving impossible odds. Time after time he returned unscathed.

On a summer morning so blue that he had nearly forgotten the carnage below him, Albrecht headed for the enemy lines, teasing fate by flying low over nests of enemy machine guns, throwing himself into the path of the ripping bullets. But destiny had her own plans. Five kilometers from his base, a Russian bi-plane descended, bursting out unexpectedly from the light clouds behind him. Two machine guns spurted from the turret behind the pilot with a soft rapping sound. Caught in the Russian's deadly fire, Albrecht made a last attempt to swerve aside. All his weight was thrown against the stick, and the plane slid sideways, clear, free. The earth rushed up to meet him, and Albrecht's breath froze as cold as a glacier inside him. He pulled the lever back, and the craft bellied out, swooping away.

But the Russian was good, and to down an Austrian was a great and rare honor. He swung the guns around and fixed his sights on the man in the cockpit. A rain of bullets belched out of the dark-muzzled machine guns, and a black swirl of smoke plumed upward, and in a dazzling red ball of fire, the plane exploded and crashed into the trees below. At the same moment, a shooting pain burned in Albrecht's shoulder. His war was over.





Sarajevo. In a blinding whirl of color and sound the ancient city of the sultans stretched itself in the furrow of the high-ridged Balkan valley. It spread itself upon the rough earth like a cat stretching sensuously in the sun. The mountain capital of the Bosnians had a long history marked by bloodshed and conquest. A ring of Austrian forts perched hawklike on the bluffs surrounding the city. Below the crenellated fortresses, the elegant residences of wealthy merchants and nobles dotted the slopes like hardy flowers who by some miracle draw sustenance from hard stone. The rich lived removed from the bustle of the town, serene and protected amidst their gardens of pears, cedar, and the vines that yielded rich grapes of silky purple. Deeper in the valley, the outlying streets of the city itself wound past enclaves of Christians as fair as their Austrian conquerors, and sects of Muslims as swarthy as the Turks who had ruled before them in their turn. Among these high-walled alleys the teeming riotous life of Sarajevo swirled always toward its bursting heart, the exotic bazaar of the Tsharshija.

It was a city of two hundred mosques and a thousand peoples, a city whose magic had not paled despite the horror of a patriot's gunshot. Turk, Greek, Montenegrin, Gypsy, lady and whore, thief

and soldier, milled through the crowded streets. Leather traders jostled vendors of sugar ices, and beggars who bound their feet in strips of goatskin pitched their strident voices higher, clamoring to be heard above the noisy chatter. Stiff-gaited Austrian officers in their green jackets strode imperiously among opium dealers, profiteers, and the hordes of refugees who poured into the Balkan capital from the north.

In the embroiling vitality of the Tsharshija, no one noticed the two tattered strangers who strolled casually through the bazaar. Faces sunken by hunger, their movements quick and hesitant, for a moment they paused beneath the old vaulted archway that separated the modern city from the timeless Muslim marketplace. With a look of wonder, they drank in the babel of voices that rose from the streets.

Marina felt the excitement of the city flood through her, and her eyes shone with delight. She leaned against Albrecht and looked contentedly around her. She was weary, and her skirt hung in tatters on her thin body. They had followed the last part of the river on foot, their horse traded for a few pieces of bread and a tiny strip of salted meat at a farmhouse. Albrecht's face was carefully blackened with fire ash, and he had also stained the skin of his hands and his forearms. He looked enough like the sunburned, weathered fair-haired men to melt into the crowd without attracting attention. They were as ragged and travel-soiled as the countless other refugees. No one would pick them out.

The merchants hawked their wares in the great square, the cries of the mountain men mingling with the high singsong of the Muslims. They cried the praises of their grain, the vegetables, the fresh well-wet lilacs, the dried fish and meat, and the sweet Turkish plums. Tall, sinewy Montenegrins conversed and sipped coffee with small, delicately boned Arabs; the Bosnian and the Turk bargained and cursed and laughed side by side. Women in embroideries so dense that the stiffness of the decoration restricted their movements to the slow, decorous motions of courtiers nodded to their veiled Muslim sisters. Men in baggy trousers and braided jackets traded news and goods with merchants in the floating djellabas and the fezzes of the Orient.

The Tsharshija was divided into the different crafts and wares. Marina and Albrecht wandered among stalls of cloth and embroideries. How Marina longed to run her fingers through the

silks and velvets, through cloth as fine as lace! Emerald greens, bright blues, virant yellows, oranges, reds, stamped with gold and worked in silk threads of every hue, the fabrics sparkled with color like jewels in an Indian crown.

"Look!" Marina followed the direction of Albrecht's hand; she did not see him looking at her with an intent interest.

Near them moved a group of young girls laughing merrily and talking all at once, like a flock of chattering parrots. They wore the big, baggy trousers that rested below their hipbones and were gathered at the ankles. The pantaloons were black or tan iridescent cotton, shot with threads of gold. Their outer tunics came down to the girls' knees and fluttered loosely open under belts of tooled leather. Marina gasped with admiration at the richness of their clothes. One girl's overdress was of supple wine-colored velvet, decorated with gold galloon. Another wore a robe of pink satin, worked in undulating stripes of gold and blue and trimmed with fancy gold braid around the sleeves and the hem. Not all the girls were dark—there were several very blond, fair-skinned women among them, and Marina found herself looking into eyes of startling blue. The young women were not veiled, and as they chattered among themselves, their necklaces and bracelets jingled and danced. The girls sparkled like a flock of brightly plumed birds.

"How beautiful they are," Marina murmured in an awed voice, remembering for the first time in a long while how soft satin felt against the skin. She glanced down at her poor rags. How she longed to burn these wretched strips of cloth and dress herself in the bright, gay colors that filled the bazaar. She longed for the warmth of silk, the soft caress of velvet on her skin, the delight of rich embroidery. She wanted to feel the weight of jewels hanging from her neck and from her wrists, the light weight of earrings dangling from her ears. Oh, to bathe in fragrant oils, to wear such finery, and to know that she was beautiful!

Albrecht suppressed a smile. He slipped his arm around her shoulders and pressed her close to him. "How they pale and lose their luster beside you," he murmured. Marina blinked back the hot tears, ashamed of her frivolous thoughts. She was alive. After all she had endured, that should be enough.

Soon they entered a maze of tiny, twisting streets. Here were the smaller stalls, women selling their handiwork, men offering

baskets and beaded necklaces for sale, bunches of hyacinth and stalls of fragrant herbs.

Marina suddenly realized that Albrecht was not moving blindly, and questioned his knowledge of the old city.

"I was stationed here for a few months at the outbreak of the war. We must hide in the Oriental quarter. There it is safe."

Marina turned to look back at the bustling square. The massive City Hall seemed to sag under its weight of balconies and balustrades, like a fat old dowager weighed down by her laces and diamonds. Beside the Austrian contribution to architecture soared the ethereal delicate spire of a mosque. In contrast, the Austrian palace was exposed in all its abomination.

"It was from the steps of the City Hall that Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his archduchess made their final farewells," Albrecht whispered. "He greeted the crowd that waited for him outside, and then he and the archduchess climbed into their plush, open automobile to ride through the city. Gavrilo Princip was waiting for them down by the esplanade by the river. The archduke got what he deserved. They hated him here and they were tired of his insults. He was a vain, arrogant man, with no feeling for the national pride of his imperial territories. Besides, I am sure the archduke would be proud of the carnage unleashed by his murder. When he hunted, he killed for the joy of killing. The smell of blood made him drunk. He would go out and shoot and bring back cartloads of deer and sacks full of game that no one could use, just for the fun of killing something. Wholesale slaughter for an afternoon's entertainment."

Marina looked up at him quizzically. "How do you know so much about him?"

"He was a distant cousin of my father's. He visited us from time to time, and he would go hunting with my father. He was the only man I never knew our dogs to be afraid of. They slunk away with their tails between their legs when they saw him approach."

An elegant automobile stood under the porte cochere of the City Hall. It was a French car, a Don Dion Bouton, a black, gleaming automobile appropriated by the Austrians from the French ambassador himself.

Albrecht glanced at the Austrian officers who climbed into the waiting car. "Poor bastards," he said. "Their time is running out here, and they are not even aware of it. The Balkans are full of

young Gavril Principes, ready to risk their lives for the pleasure of shooting an Austrian. This charade cannot last much longer."

They entered the Muslim sector, following the winding streets until they reached a porticoed inn. As they entered the startling cool darkness, blue tiles and white sandstone walls turned the light to a muted, soft shade of mauve. A long-robed, turbaned man appeared through a curtained archway, bowing deferentially to Albrecht. A few coins secured them a room for the night, and Albrecht scrawled a name on the yellowed police ledger. The innkeeper did not even glance at it, nor at the dueling scar that cut across Albrecht's cheek like a brand.

A Muslim girl with sandaled feet and downcast eyes pushed back the cedar door to their room and left them. Albrecht secured the bar across the bolt rings set in either side of the doorway. He rested his back against the heavy door. They were safe—and alone.

Albrecht drank in Marina's violet eyes, the slim roundness of her body beneath the black cotton dress. He could see the long line of her thigh under her skirt. Here, in this first moment of safety, the desire that had lay dormant burst forth between them. Albrecht's arms reached out for her and she came to him, heeding the urgings of her blood. He cradled her against his chest, his face pressed into her dark curls. He held her tenderly, his desire for the dark-haired girl overpowering him, taking him by storm. Marina too felt the burning touch of desire stir her blood. But she did not want it. She did not want to feel the pain of loving a man again.

"No." Marina began to tremble, resisting her need for him.

"Don't be afraid, Marina," the Austrian whispered. Marina moaned through fear-frozen lips, shrinking back from him. Heedless of her protests, he undressed her, her body shaking beneath his hands. With infinite tenderness he kissed her fragrant skin, wooing the warm blood back into her limbs, and slowly Marina's fear-stiffened body relaxed, her terror giving way before the new sensation that flooded through her as the core of fear dissolved. She arched gracefully under him, her body alive to the thrill of pleasure for the first time since her fateful afternoon with Sergei Rogozhin. Tears filled her eyes as the long-cold fire of passion licked through her loins.

Her arms wrapped around Albrecht and she called his name

with a moaning cry. His lips burned on hers. Albrecht buried his face in her breasts, his body arched, and with a moan of ecstasy he plunged into the deep warmth of her body, her softness yielding beneath his thrust, her soul open to his raging desire and her own.

"Yes, yes," she moaned as the passion inside her swelled to a fever pitch, and gave herself to the tumultuous wave of ecstasy that swept over her in a crescendo of sweet oblivion.

Afterward he knew that his feeling for the dark, beautiful woman beside him was what he had sought in the arms of his mistresses and his wife. But until now the warm rush of feeling around his heart had been absent, the final surge of love elusive.

"Marina . . ." he whispered.

Marina's eyelashes fluttered open and she smiled in the semi-darkness. Her fingers curled around his hand, and in an impulsive gesture he raised her hand to his lips and kissed the rosy tips of her fingers.

"To find you," he exclaimed in wonder, "to find you now, after all this . . ."

Very slowly, haltingly at first because he was unaccustomed to confidence, Albrecht told her of all that had gone before. He talked of his father, of his beautiful and distant mother, of his cold, elegant wife. He told her about the rich, opulent world of Vienna, where a man was raised to believe in the honor of his country and in the honor of women.

"Whatever the crimes your mistress or your wife is guilty of, you must forgive. Whatever outrages are committed in the name of the empire, these, too, you must forgive. Because the priests and the generals have sanctioned it, it is good, no matter what ugly truth their speeches and fanfares hide. But I could not go on believing in the war. I saw the bodies of the men exploding into pieces, like toys. A well-aimed *Minenwerfer* can destroy a whole trench. In a no-man's war, this war is beyond anything one could imagine. Bodies hang from the barbed-wire entanglements like dead leaves off a tree. Liquid fire burns its victims alive. I thought I had seen everything. Until I got to Przemyśl. I had to ground my plane there—the tip of the wing had been hit by a *Lewis*. I saw men, or what had been men, clothes, bodies, faces, colored by encrusted mud. They were skeletal, in shock, their eyes blinded to everything but the warning flares that lit

the sky overhead. Rats as big as dogs from feasting on human flesh scurried among the corpses. There was a blinding red explosion as an enemy grenade hit its mark. I saw a boy, fifteen at the most, his face ashen, his lips moving uncomprehendingly. Both hands had been torn off at the wrists."

Albrecht fell silent. Would nothing ever erase the memory of that boy's sudden suffering? Would he carry the image of that piteous young soldier with him until the end of his days?

"And . . ." Marina prompted softly.

"At that moment I knew that there is no cause worthy of such terrible sacrifice. No honor and no pride which merit this wholesale slaughter. I hated myself, I hated what I had become. My love for flying had blinded me. I had become a tool of the killers—and a killer in my own right, as loathsome as the old archduke himself."

Marina studied his face intently, beginning to understand. A deserter—but not a coward. It took courage to choose to turn one's back on everything one knew. Yet he had left the pleasures of the gay Austrian capital behind him as she had forfeited the luxury of St. Petersburg. They were not so very different.

"What will we do now?" In her question was a vow and an acceptance, and she saw that Albrecht understood that she loved him.

"We must get to Salonika, Marina. It is an Allied port. From there we can board a ship for Italy. Italy is a beautiful place, Marina. Warm, full of sunshine, full of people who love life and know how to savor it. We will learn to enjoy the world again. We will begin again there, just you and I together, as man and wife."

Marina's eyes glazed with tears. Here was a man who truly loved her, who wanted her in the face of all odds. Wordlessly she nodded.

"Good." Albrecht kissed her soft breast. The matter was resolved. He folded her in his arms and held her close to him. Her heart beat against his.

Marina lay quietly until she knew by Albrecht's regular breathing that he was asleep. She curled her arm around his neck and very gently kissed him on the mouth. Pushing back the light blanket, she slipped quietly out of bed.

They would need money. Money to travel to Salonika. Money to buy their passage to Italy. Because of Albrecht she knew that

she could love again, that she was still a woman. Tonight she would give her dowry to this courageous man. Silent as a thief, she dressed and slipped out of the inn into the narrow alleyways of Sarajevo.





With her heart beating wildly, Marina struggled to remember signs that would help her find her way back. Here a small square with steps leading up to a well; there a gnarled olive tree growing over a wall; a small mosque; a fountain.

At last she came to a large open square near the European sector. There were lights here, and music. Small cafés gave out onto the square, and waiters passed through the crowd of diners with heavily laden trays. Suddenly she heard loud, raucous singing in the street behind her, and Marina pressed herself into a shallow doorway. A group of soldiers passed by, talking and laughing loudly among themselves, the smell of beer wafting from them like a rancid cologne.

"You will learn, my friend," Marina heard one of them say, "not to put your faith in lady luck—or in any other lady, for that matter." There was an explosion of laughter at this as one of the men made a comment that Marina could not hear.

"Very well," another voice said. "Enjoy your furlough as you see fit. As for me, I'm going to see what tempting morsels Mama Aicesha has reserved for us tonight."

"I'm with you," a soldier said. "And me," cried another. There

was more banter, and then they separated, some to whores and some to cards.

One of the soldiers turned alone into a dark, narrow lane filled with blue shadows, and Marina knew with the instincts of a thief that he carried money. He walked quickly, with the firm tread of a man who knew precisely where he was going, leading her down a narrow, tunnelliike lane, where the walls stood high around them. Faint light filtered through the iron latticework of the high-set windows, and in the gloomy shadows Marina momentarily lost her quarry.

Her fingers guided her along a stuccoed wall, and she heard music flare and wane in an instant. Then it rumbled through the thick stone, and her fingers found a wooden door studded with copper nails. Her fingers turned the iron handle, and she pressed forward into an explosion of noise and light and smoke.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the sputtering oil lamps and the blue-gray haze of smoke that hung in the air, she took in the crowded, low-ceilinged caravansary. Crowds of men in uniforms, some with elegantly dressed companions on their arms, others alone, filled the room. Gamblers hunched over the gaming boards praying over the throw of the dice. Among the players passed turbaned servants with trays of drinks in tall, minted glasses. A young harelipped child poured coffee from a long-spouted samovar of delicately hammered metal. Dyed blonds and red-tressed seductresses flashed their hard-earned diamonds, their eyes inviting, their red lips petulant as they smoked endless cigarettes from ivory holders. The air was scented with the pungent aroma of sweet tobacco.

On a dais in the center of the room two musicians with lute and horn of polished wood played sibilant, evocative music. The lithe, supple dancer was naked but for the gauzy cloth hanging from a broad gold belt encircling her rounded belly, and the gold disks that covered the nipples of her glistening breasts. A crowd of drunken, disheveled soldiers shouted and clapped their hands, cheering her on.

Marina spotted her soldier. The dancer's charms did not interest him. He was intent upon the card game of four men who played in silence, pausing only to sip dark coffee from the small cups beside them. Two of the players wore the red fez of the Muslim. The cards were a mystery to Marina, for though she watched carefully, she could not discern any pattern in the turn

of the cards. She could not tell who was winning until the oldest of the men swept the pile of coins from the center of the table into his leather purse and rose abruptly. The Austrian soldier slipped into the vacated chair.

Marina approached the table and watched for over an hour. The Austrian was good at cards, and tonight luck was on his side. Game after game he swept the coins toward him. The pile of gold and crinkled paper at his elbow grew until at last the others refused to risk another game. Laughing jubilantly, the Austrian waved a servant over to him and threw two coins on the tray as the boy poured glasses of absinthe for the players. As he left the gaming house, Marina was at his heels.

Marina saw that his step was slow. Good! The liquor made him easier prey for her. The soldier faltered once and lurched against the sloping wall, and Marina took her chance. The Austrian turned at her touch to see her violet eyes boldly staring at him in open invitation.

Did this whore think he would pay for her? She was thin and not too strong—not likely to put up much of a struggle. Why pay good money to Madame Aieesha for what he could get for free? Besides, there was something feline about the girl, something wild which intrigued him. "It's hard to see what you look like. I'd like to see what it is I am offered before I buy it. Here, let's have a look." Marina felt his breath with its smell of sweet, cloying liquor. His hands fumbled at the neck of her linen blouse.

Marina's skin crawled at his touch, but she knew she would have the money. This suddenly rich soldier was used to beer, not the heavy, strong drinks of the gaming house.

She sidestepped him coyly. "Come, be nice," she whispered. "I know what a man you are. Come. Follow me."

He hesitated, and she called to him tauntingly, "Come with me, my soldier, if you're brave enough."

Marina lured him along the steeply pitched streets farther into the ancient casbah. The soldier was tiring. Marina could hear his breath coming in hoarse, labored gasps. But she did not slacken her pace until she knew that the fullness of his strength had been spent in the chase.

"We must be halfway to Constantinople by now," he whispered hoarsely, trying to catch his breath.

She tempted him with an inviting smile. One hand toyed with

the ties of her bodice, but the other firmly grasped the dagger that was hidden against her skin. The Austrian reached for his prize, closing his strong arms firmly around her waist and pressing his panting lips against hers. Marina sank her teeth into his mouth and bit him with all her strength. He jumped back with a curse. Drops of blood pearly darkly. Marina pushed the knife to his throat, the point of it pricking the thick vein along the side of his neck.

"By the blood of holy Christ, what a fool I am for having fallen for this trick!"

"Not a word," hissed Marina. "Give me the money you have inside your coat." She held the knife firmly.

"Yes, I remember now." Awareness flickered behind his drunken stupor. "You were at the gaming house. You are worse than the worst of the whores. At least they give you something for your money. You are a thief." He spat contemptuously.

"Quiet! Give me your money, or I will kill you."

"You bitch," he cursed through clenched teeth, "I'll . . ." His arm snapped out with the speed of a striking snake. The cold barrel of a gun grazed her cheek, and she flung herself upon him, her nails scraping across his face. She fell onto his chest and shoulders, hitting him with all of her weight, and the breath was knocked out of his lungs. The soldier's head hit the cobblestones with a heavy, dull sound, his body went limp, and he lay very still.

Marina searched the soldier hurriedly. Her nimble fingers found the heavy pouch filled with his night's winnings, and she tucked it into her skirt. "Thank you," she whispered softly. "Holy Mother, forgive me," was her prayer when she darted away.

The high, reedy voices of the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer pierced the dawn as she made her way back to the inn. The room lay in dark, deep shadows as Marina crept with the leather pouch concealed under her blouse. Behind her she heard the sharp, dry click of a pistol.

"Stand still. Don't move. Don't turn around." A rough hand grabbed her shoulder, twisting her around so that her face was in the light that came from the hall.

It was Albrecht, his face pale with shock. His eyes narrowed into pinpoints of angry light and his face turned as hard as stone.

"I awoke and you were gone. I thought you had been cap-

tured. I have been looking for you all night, combing the streets," he said roughly. "You don't know this city, Marina. It is dangerous, and anything could happen to you. You could have been raped, or tortured, beaten unconscious, even killed without me ever knowing. People vanish in Sarajevo every day."

She did not care about his anger, or the pain he had felt when he did not find her sleeping next to him. The triumph at her success had made her forget all of this, even the danger that would lie ahead of them. His gun clattered to the floor. "Where were you?"

Marina burst into a gale of weary laughter. She laughed until her ribs ached. All the tension and the fear of the terrifying night snapped at her nerves. Her mouth froze into a grimace; the hollow, weary laughter tore through her, searing her chest like a knife. She shook with a fevered exaltation.

Albrecht slapped her hard. Her head snapped back, and the wild laughter died in her throat. His eyes burned into hers.

"Marina, what is it? Tell me what happened!"

Her strength gone, she thrust the leather sack at him in triumph. He looked at it incredulously.

"Our freedom, Albrecht," she cried. "Our freedom. Salonika." He opened his arms and she fell into them, sobbing.



The next night they were among a thousand others who had been falling since the morning, and now the dampness had penetrated into the vast cavern, hanging in the air like a wet, icy sheet. The feeble light of the naked electric bulbs only made the scene more desolate. Pairs of soldiers strode through the throng of weary women and the thin silent men. Tired, hungry, and face to face with the unknown, the refugees stood quietly among the odd-shaped, improvised bundles that held their few possessions. One word fueled their hope. Salonika, the city of freedom.

Marina and Albrecht had exchanged their tattered rags for new clothes. She wore knee-high boots of black leather, a clean white blouse, and her skirts were full, gathered, and black, with a wide hem of colorful embroidery that reached to her ankles. A dark kerchief was tied over her hair. The pouch of gold coins hung from her belt beneath her skirt. She was undistinguishable from the young Balkan girls in the crowd. Albrecht wore the full baggy trousers and the embroidered vest of a farmer. There was nothing about the ordinary young couple to attract the attention of the authorities. With any luck at all, they would board the train, and with a lot of luck, they would slip past the security

border checks without being asked to produce the proper identification papers.

A short, ruddy-complexioned man in a resplendent uniform emerged hurriedly from a glass-encased kiosk at the far end of the platform. He forced his way through the tightly packed crowd, shouting and issuing orders in a confused flurry, speaking to everyone and no one at once. Imploring hands plucked at his sleeve. He shook them off impatiently. One voice after another followed him, begging him for a pass to ensure a place on the train. "But, Excellency, please help me. My case is very special, my husband sent for me . . . my son is dying in Salonika, Excellency, an exception, for the love of God . . ." All the cases were very special, and under his self-possessed exterior, he felt very real horror for the plight of the people who crowded the station. He had never grown used to what the war had done. How many had waited here, day after day? How many had been turned away? How many families separated on this platform? But what could one do?

With appropriate deference, he approached the Austrian officers, beads of sweat prickling his bristly mustache. He was panting from nervous exhaustion, and his uniform showed big spreading stains beneath his armpits. Albrecht listened to the words that flooded forth from the stationmaster's lips.

"Humble apologies, Excellencies. But the trains are reduced to a third of the scheduled number. Military requisitions. And of the few we still have left, the patriots . . ." He corrected himself quickly, ". . . the rebels are fast destroying with their bombs. Only last week there were two locomotives lost . . ."

The explanations and sundry excuses issued forth in a steady stream. Albrecht suppressed a smile of weary knowledge. Surely these Austrian officers did not need to be reminded of the difficulties of their mountain regions. Albrecht noticed a large number of soldiers who milled in loose ranks at the front end of the platform. A major troop entrainment, from the looks of it. Not an auspicious omen.

In a blue-white belch of smoke the monstrous locomotive pulled into the station, and people surged forward. The train slowed to a halt. The doors of the train were blocked by the crossed rifles of the train guards.

"Two small bundles for each family," the stationmaster ordered. There were crying and angry shouts as this order filtered

through the crowd, and hasty decisions were made. This bundle contained food, that one held clothes, and in flimsy cardboard suitcases were the few treasures salvaged from an uprooted life. A wedding veil, a pair of favorite candlesticks to keep or sell, a delicate tablecloth made by a long-dead hand. Photographs and keepsakes were left behind. These did not matter. Nothing mattered now but a place on the train and Salonika.

At the same time as the question of the baggage was being resolved, Marina saw a squad of soldiers march toward the train. They carried pale, slatted wooden cases of wine and champagne. These luxurious items were lifted aboard for the refreshment and pleasure of the Austrian commander who was traveling with them. Large willow baskets filled with plums and perfect opalescent grapes followed the cases of wine. All the finest that the vanquished country had to offer was designated for the palate of the conqueror. A subaltern shouted to his men to step lively with the trays of sweetmeats, not to drop the rounds of fragrant cheeses or press them too roughly with their hands. Tins of elegant biscuits, chocolates bought on the black market or extorted from merchants, and crates of Austrian beer that had already made a long journey from Vienna vanished into the gullet of the train.

A shrieking blast of the whistle signaled that boarding would begin. There was a moment of confusion as the soldiers moved away from the doors. Albrecht seized Marina's hand and pulled her toward the front of the train. Any search of the train would begin at the back and sweep forward. The more warning they had, the better. The fretful squalling of a baby sounded over the sudden din, and small children were pushed to the ground as the mob surged forward. A bundle tore open and a loaf of black bread tumbled to the ground, a bottle of wine crashed to the stones and splattered in a bloodlike purple stain. A woman screamed as she was pushed roughly aside, a man cursed, another raised his fist in answer, and the fight brought a contingent of armed soldiers rushing to the fracas.

Marina and Albrecht saw none of it. They were blinded to everything but the brightly lit doorways of the front compartment. At last they were on the train, the doors shut behind them, and Marina turned away from the pleading faces pressed against the grime-streaked glass. A second shriek of the whistle, and the



ground beneath them seemed to rumble as the train pulled ponderously out of the station and began its journey southward.

In his private car at the rear of the train, Field Marshal Frederick Von Kronenberg-Menne und Haller sank back into his large morocco armchair, settled his arms on the generous armrests, and lit his meerschaum pipe. The luxury car in which he rode was one of the few of its kind to have survived the outbreak of the war, and he was not oblivious of the fact that the expensively appointed car reflected his importance.

The car was broken into two living rooms, separated by walls of handcut glass. The section of the car where he sat was furnished with elegant morocco leather; two broad overstuffed sofas faced each other across a low malachite table, and a third sofa was built into the back wall of the compartment. There were three armchairs besides his own; they stood on either side of the facing sofas. Behind him was a group of leather chairs arranged around a glass-topped table—for card playing, he guessed shrewdly. Beyond the glass partition, the furniture was a rich blue color, the velvet covers topped with Brussels lace. The fittings and the walls of the compartment were of solid oak. A semielliptical false roof arched overhead, and damask curtains hung in the windows.

The field marshal touched his plump, rosy fingertips together and pondered the journey ahead. At once his contented mood melted into the air, like the blue smoke of his pipe. The disturbing memory of his meeting with the general nagged at him with the obstinacy of a toothache.

"The partisan groups have been allowed to become more and more daring, more and more impudent," the general had ranted. "It is our duty, and it will be your mission, to see that these outrages against our men and our supply lines are stopped. In the past month alone, only two trains have passed through the southern Balkans without incident. With the buildup of the allied forces in Salonika, this rail line must be secure. At any minute we may be called upon to defend the line between the allied territory and our own. I do not wish to fight both British and rebel at the same time. The tracks have been mined, the ties sabotaged, tunnels blocked by landslides, officers' cars broken into and our men executed by masked assassins. This cannot go on. I am sending you, my most valued officer, aboard this train, with a

full battalion of troops at your command. We will show these killers that we will not tolerate this anarchy!"

In return for the perilous honor of daring the patriots, the general had invested him with nearly omnipotent powers. Wherever he came upon bands of saboteurs, executions were to be swift and immediate. Von Kronenberg's word would alone decide a man's fate. In addition, he would have at his command a battalion of the best of Austria's soldiers. He must show no mercy to the enemies of the empire. He reached for the sash cord nearby and rang for his aide.

With a flair born of long experience, Subaltern Wilhelm Kruger wrapped a napkin around the neck of a champagne bottle and twisted off the cork in a single fluid motion. He popped the bottle into the waiting ice bucket and straightened his uniform. He swept the ornate silver tray into the air and set it on the small rosewood table with a flourish.

"Dinner is served, Excellency," he murmured.

Von Kronenberg's mood lightened, and with great relish he gave vent to his lusty enthusiasm for food. He shifted his corpulent body and lovingly spooned caviar into a crystal bowl of cracked ice. He savored the rich Strasbourg pâté and tiny, exquisite French vinegar pickles, banishing all thoughts of partisan bombs from his mind, and soon fell into a much more pleasant reverie.

His beautiful, amorous, voluptuous Julie! He could barely tear himself away from the memory of her soft, dimpled arms, of her hair artistically disheveled by the afternoon's activities, of her full, shapely bosom rising and falling under the thin crepe-de-chine chemise. How he loved to watch her firm ripe breasts move under the silky fabric, their large areolas faintly visible under the peach-colored cloth.

The field marshal shifted in his chair, and the fine leather squeaked protestingly under his bulk. What a woman she was! How different she was from Ursula, his wife. An unpleasing memory of his devoted baroness came to him. Ursula with her dry, hard little breasts, her chapped knees, her long thin nose, and hands that always smelled of antiseptic from hospital charity work. There was something to be said for a war that relieved one of a wife like that.

Julie had promised to be true to him. But he was too much a man of the world not to know how easily such promises are

made, and how hard it is to keep them. Especially for a beautiful young widow. A vision wafted up to him from the deepest corner of hell—his Julie in the arms of another, sighing under another's caresses, moaning with pleasure as he stroked her heavy milk-white thighs. The field marshal struck the armrest with a clenched fist. Not even thoughts of his beloved mistress could ease him.

"Kruger," he roared, "bring my dossiers."

As quick as a king's handmaiden, on silent feet, Kruger appeared with a thick leather case under his arm. He brandished the champagne and a frosted glass reassuringly.

"I thought perhaps, Excellency," he murmured, "that you might be thirsty."

"Yes, yes." The field marshal waved his hand in the direction of the table. "Leave it here." He adjusted his monocle and then opened the dossiers and studied the headings.

"Methods of Eliminating Suspected Partisans," he read. "Enemies of Our Army," "Suspected Spies," "Saboteurs," "Deserters Not Yet Apprehended." His eyes flickered down the page. "Von Drusen, Von Limmer, Von Viebahn . . ." He stopped. The name had a familiar ring, and yet he could not place it. Perhaps he had known the father at military school. He sucked his lower lip thoughtfully and rubbed the side of his nose with a thick finger as he struggled to concentrate on the concerns of his rank. But his mind once more wandered from the page before him. He gave in to the intensely sweet memory of the soft perfumed skin of his captivating Julie.

The train had hardly left Sarajevo when the rumor flew among the passengers that a search of papers had begun. In a swift motion Albrecht forced the latch of the window with his knife and eased his body through the narrow opening into the blinding rain. He reached for Marina's hands and held her until he was sure that her feet had found the secure base of the iron ladder that ran to the compartment's roof.

They crept over the roofs of the cars while the lights of Sarajevo sped past them in the distance. At the end of each car Albrecht leaped ahead, turning to reach for Marina as she swallowed her fear of falling beneath the rushing wheels of the train. At last Marina and Albrecht lowered themselves into the

last car of the train. By now the meticulous, methodical search of the soldiers would have taken them past this point.

This car was far different from the relative comfort of the first. The compartment was as innocent of decoration and as dreary as a cattle car. The seats had been stripped and the floor was covered with dirty wet straw. The car smelled like a neglected stable. They found a small space along the wall between a young peasant woman with a baby in her arms, and an old man in a threadbare European suit who sat on his suitcase smoking a thick, pungent cigarette. He stared with unabashed curiosity and raised his nicotine-stained fingers to the brim of his cap as Albrecht and Marina settled beside him.

Others around them began to open their precious parcels of food, perhaps a thick slice of bread and a dessert of wild plums. The young peasant woman munched on a dried fig between her strong white teeth. An old woman cut an apple with a sharp knife. She gave half of it to a boy who sucked with obvious pleasure on the firm, ripe flesh. Marina's stomach rumbled hungrily. "It won't be much longer," Albrecht whispered, as if he had read her thoughts. "Ten more hours, if all goes well."

The mountainous terrain sloped sharply upward on one side of the train tracks, and on the other side the rocky defile dropped steeply from the tracks. They left the churning black river and the Slatibor range behind them. Soon the train would burst into the broad wide bosom of the Kosovo plain. Albrecht pointed out the town as they slipped by in the night. Vriana, where before the war the red sea of opium poppies had swept to the horizon and the black-skirted peasant girls had bent their backs to the harvest. Komarova with its stark white houses and tree-lined avenues swept by them, then Pristina, Novoberdo, Gilan. He had flown over these hills many, many times in his biplane.

Marina snuggled closer to Albrecht. He looked at the long, soft curve of her throat as she rested beside him, his eyes softened tenderly. In the veins of this exquisite creature ran the noble blood of the boyars and the hot passion of the Gypsies. In her arms he had found the freedom to love. He curled a strand of her hair around his finger, and as surreptitiously as a shy schoolboy he pressed it to his lips.

A muffled explosion jarred the train to a halt, breaking Marina from her slumber. The passengers were thrown toward the front of the compartment, and the crowded wagon was filled

with terrified screams. The light flickered and went out, and the car sank into pitch-blackness.

Albrecht pressed his mouth to Marina's ear. "The partisans. Another bomb. They are sure to search. Stay by me and do what I tell you."

The wide doors were thrown back, and lanterns threw long shadows into the car. Silhouettes of helmeted troops loomed in the mountain night.

"Everyone detain immediately! Line up and remain silent!" The voice was harsh and guttural. "Leave all your belongings. Quickly!"

Obediently the passengers clambered down the rough iron steps to the ground. Someone pressed against Marina from behind. She turned with a start to find the little European's face close to hers. She smelled the cheap tobacco of his cigarette, and her stomach twisted in repulsion. His thin lips curled back from his decayed teeth, and he grinned maliciously at her. "You slipped through their fingers, eh?" he cackled. "You have no papers? That is very bad. Without the necessary documents . . ." He laughed.

Albrecht's fist closed on the grimy collar of the little European's shirt. "Keep your words to yourself, old fool, or you may take them to the grave with you."

The European's eyes widened in terror, but Marina saw him stare long and hard at the pale scar cutting across Albrecht's cheek.

"Don't harm me, my friend. I wish to help you," the little man whined in a silky voice, his tongue flicking nervously over his lips. "Listen to me. When the soldiers come near, I will pretend to fall ill, and their attention will be drawn to me. Then you can escape."

Albrecht stared hard at the man. "Why should we trust you?"

Again the hollow laugh. The old man reached up a quivering hand and pointed at the dueling scar. "You hate the Austrians, though you are one. You have no choice. That is enough."

Bright sparks of the patrol lanterns moved toward them, heralded by the crunching boots of the troops, their Mannlicher rifles slung over their shoulders. There were muffled explanations as papers were examined and handed back. Far ahead, Marina could see the wreckage of one of the front cars and the twisted metal of the tracks where the partisan bomb had exploded. The bodies of two men lay by the debris.

"If they stop at our European friend for longer than it takes to examine his papers, don't wait for me, run."

"But you, Albrecht!" she whispered. "I cannot—"

"You must, and you will, Marina," he said firmly.

In numb horror she watched as the four soldiers handed back the papers of a bearded Muslim and wife and child and moved on to the little European. Would he betray them? The man fumbled forth with his documents, and as he handed them his papers, he bent his head forward and whispered.

Marina felt Albrecht's hand close on her arm. Fascinated, she stared at the scene being played out a few meters from them. The hunched old man was whispering his tale. Another soldier joined the first, and then another. Suddenly the informant pivoted and pointed his crooked finger at Albrecht.

"Run! Marina, Run!"

He pushed her, and she stumbled forward. Rifle shots cracked over her head. Then with a chilling gasp she halted. The perimeter was guarded. She ran blindly. "Halt!" Two soldiers pointed their weapons at her heart.

"No farther, Fräulein!" "To the train, move!" Caught!

Field Marshal Von Kronenberg's head snapped up at the quick knocking at the door of his compartment. His second in command snapped to attention in the doorway.

"Herr Field Marshal, the track clearing should be finished by daybreak. Our search of the passengers has turned up one family of Serbs without identification, and two others of more interest." The second in command cleared his throat nervously. "I would not ordinarily bother you with this, sir, but it appears that one of our passengers is a deserter. He has a woman with him."

"A woman? So our deserters have women when loyal troops must go without the charms of the ladies." The field marshal smiled fatuously through his monocle. He was feeling content, and he was not above a bit of irony. "Well, well, well. Bring the lucky man and his loyal companion here."

In a moment Von Kronenberg was face to face with Albrecht. He was handsome, the field marshal thought. He held himself like a soldier. There was no mistaking the proud carriage, nor the scar that marked his cheek. A deserter, with the *wildfleisch* on his face! It was an outrage! Von Kronenberg drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair.

"Since you remain silent, then I will speak. We will see how much I already know. We will see if I am a competent detective. You are a soldier. You are a deserter."

Albrecht smiled coolly at this bit of deduction, but he did not reply. The field marshal flushed angrily. Insolent to boot! He glanced at the girl. She had a dark beauty that even the rough clothes she wore could not conceal. Though he much preferred the lavishly endowed charms of women like Julie, this girl intrigued him. A flicker of admiration sparked in his eyes. Very interesting. . . .

"Very well," he said, addressing Albrecht. "We know that you are a soldier, you have no papers, you are out of uniform. A gentleman. An officer. A man of honor. Yes?"

"You are only partly right, Herr Field Marshal," Albrecht replied dryly. "No longer an officer, but a man of honor. Yes."

The field marshal overlooked the insult and continued, "You know the penalty for desertion?"

Albrecht faced the field marshal squarely. "I would face my own death gladly rather than stand behind a gun again."

"Afraid?" The field marshal smirked.

"No, tired of murder," Albrecht replied. His blue eyes held the gaze of the corpulent officer, and in spite of himself, the field marshal felt ashamed. Then hot anger took him over.

"As you wish," Von Kronenberg barked harshly. "Klienchart, Murer, take him out."

"No, no!" Marina rushed to Albrecht's arms. But the soldiers shoved her backward.

"No, Marina," Albrecht cried. "Herr Field Marshal, my wife, she had nothing to do with this."

Von Kronenberg smiled weakly. "I am also a man of honor, Herr Deserter. Your wife is innocent and will accordingly be spared."

Albrecht's eyes softened. "Thank you."

"No!" Marina threw herself into Albrecht's arms, fighting against this horror. He held her tenderly against him. "Be brave, my love, my only love, you must go on."

In a nightmare, Marina left the compartment. Soldiers pulled her out of Albrecht's arms. A disembodied voice shouted an order, and the night was shattered by the explosion of rifles. Marina's knees buckled under her. "Albrecht," she cried hoarsely.

His body lay at the foot of a tree. In the pale arch of the lamps she saw the little European creep from the shadows and run his fingers through the pockets of her dead lover. She escaped into merciful unconsciousness.





In the long, narrow room that was her office, Aimée de Beaudricourt, countess of France and reverend mother of St. Cyril's Military Hospital in Salonika, caught her mind straying from the reams of official papers on her desk. She must get her work done before evening rounds, she thought with the fierce determination that was characteristic of her. But in spite of herself, she rested her weary forehead on her long, fragile hand.

She had been fresh from the convent in France when she first arrived in the walled city, the gem of the Aegean. Soldiers of the Turkish Crescent patrolled the high girdle of battlements broken by ancient, crenellated towers. From here they surveyed the harbor where the red-tiled houses spilled down to the water. The broad, fertile plains swelled to the Rhodope Mountains, embracing the sparkling bay like a gigantic amphitheater for the gods.

Greek soldiers mounted guard over the old battlements now. English, French, and Russian military units also flew their flags in this Allied port where they had gathered to protect the neutrality of Greece from any possible interference.

For twenty-five generations this city writhed under the Turkish boot. But it was in 1912 on the day of St. Dominic, the patron saint of this city of so many saints and holy men, that the Greeks

returned to conquer the walled city. In Mother Aimée's memory she still heard the sweet music of celebration that wafted from the homes of the rich in the Kalamaria quarter and saw the extravagant fireworks displays that illuminated the tiled city and the deep waters of the bay. The people crowded on doorsteps and leaned from terraces and loggias to pelt the victorious Greeks with a rain of blossoms. Ancient dignified men danced with the happy abandon of children, their long robes swishing around their ankles and the knots of their silk girdles swinging in wide arcs around them.

Stately old women picked up their black silk skirts and danced with the zest of young girls. Aimée saw an old woman, her silk petticoats held in her fingertips, moving through the intricate steps of a traditional dance with a grace belying the wrinkles in her face, her bosom heaving under her white blouse and furlined bolero.

Aimée remembered the bells of jubilant churches pealing out their thanks in a chorus at midnight. First the heavy, sonorous chimes of St. George in the old quarter, then the bells of St. Cyril's on the hillside, with those of St. Methodius answering from below. The choir of thanksgiving swelled over the water and rolled over the broad plains beyond Salonika. The very mountains rang for joy.

With the advent of the war, Salonika became the refuge of the homeless and the dispossessed of the war-torn north. In an unending flood they poured through her gates. The pinch of privation was felt as keenly here as in the besieged cities of Europe.

Legions of refugees had flooded Salonika's gates since the Serbian capitulation. They came by the thousands, by train, in wagons, on foot, fleeing from every corner of eastern Europe and strife-torn Russia to the promise and safety of this allied base. Like locusts swarming over a wheat field already picked bare by those who had come before. "The visitors," as the native Salonikans termed them in a blunt refusal to see them as their brothers, were working against time. The only hope for the thousands was to somehow book passage on a ship sailing for Italy, for Spain, for Crete, perhaps even for Constantinople. But to realize this goal took luck, and money. The once-gracious city was beset by crime, by robberies and murders. Men had died over a piece of fish or a crust of bread. Those that had money were forced not only to pay for their passage but also to line the pockets of the

boat captains and the port officials who controlled the flow of emigrants. Those who had none became prey to the epidemics which burned throughout the city with the destructive force of a fire. Dysentery, influenza, and typhus had at least the blessing of thinning the ranks of the suffering. Disease struck at the refugees with an impartial hand—old, young, saint, or swindler died under the ravages of fever that year. And those who survived had cause to wish themselves dead.

In the despair of their poverty, refugee women turned to the ancient resort of prostitution. With five hundred thousand men—French, British, Italian, Russian—there were never enough women. Let the bishop wave his plump, jeweled fingers in gestures of disgust as he talked of it in shocked tones. What did he know of the desire to live that drove even once-honorable women, often persons of rank in their own countries, into this depravity?

Mother Aimée knew that her only escape from these horrors was through her work. With the completion of each task, no matter how small or how trivial, she consoled herself that she had accomplished some good.

The door to her office was suddenly thrown back and a nurse entered with a sheaf of papers that would be added to those already piled before Mother Aimée. The insistent jangling of the brass telephone allowed Aimée no opportunity to speak to her assistant.

The brisk and confident voice of General Henri Serreuil, chief of Allied forces, greeted her. "Reverend Mother, I understand that you have an urgent request to make of me?" he boomed over the wire. "Do you ever request anything that is not urgent, anything that must not be accomplished within the day?"

She laughed at the gruff explosion that only masked a deep tenderness and affection that bound them. In the years of the war, they had become both ally and foe to each other, the concerns of one merging and conflicting with the needs of the other, their respective domains struggling against each other for precedence.

"If my request could be accomplished in a day, would I have turned to you, Henri?" she parried. "I suppose that I am fortunate you were able to find a few minutes for our concerns, rather than those of the military."

"Please, dearest Aimée, I concede the victory to your side. You

know very well that I have never been a match for you. Tell me what you need of me, and the men I can spare. If it can be done . . ."

"I do not ask for miracles, General. That is the province of one of even greater rank than yours. All I need is what I have already asked you for many times."

The reverend mother studied a paper on her desk. "In November we were promised new dressings along with a shipment of sulfa. Metal fittings for the splint factories have been due for two months. We need canvas for stretchers and wood for heat. Also bandages, food, *mon général* . . ."

A sigh of exasperation told her that the answer would be the same as it had been for the past weeks.

"Are you sure that it is not a miracle you desire? There are none of these things here, and no way of knowing when they will arrive. Your requisitions are before me, Mother Aimée. When your supplies arrive . . ."

"You must help us now, Henri! You must! Give us at least the canvas we need. Your useless field guns are protected from the rains by sheets of it. Give it to me."

"You will have what we can spare, or salvage. I will find your canvas, Reverend Mother."

Aimée smiled. This small concession emboldened her to other demands. "For how many weeks do your men have rations?" she asked with soft cunning.

"A month," the General blurted. He had been trapped.

"Good. All I need is one week's supply. There are children here, Henri. Children."

He agreed to this and the rest of her demands with no further struggle. He was a soldier, but he was not ignorant of human privation or need. His major concern in past months had shifted from military matters to the necessity of relief for the crowded city and hospital under his command. Both he and Aimée de Beaudricourt were frustrated by the unique situation existing in the Greek port.

The treaty of 1873 had established what amounted to an allied protectorate over Greece, though King Constantine had steadfastly stuck by his country's neutrality. Salonika, at the base of the Balkans, afforded the Allies both a much-needed striking point at Austria-Hungary's southern flank and access to the eastern Mediterranean. British and French divisions filled the

city, abetted by twenty thousand of the finest Italian troops, and even a Russian battalion that had been spared from the Roumanian fighting. But international politics had frustrated any offensive that Serreuil might have initiated from Salonika. For the first year the troops had done little but build a railroad line that could eventually be used to carry them toward battle. The rest of their energies had been spent in acting as a glorified police force for the harbor town itself. Serreuil felt trapped between the unknown battlegrounds to the north, and the Mediterranean, which was besieged by German submarines and Turkish gunboats. His friends the British, with their fabled navy, were stretched too thinly over the miles of open sea to clear the shipping lanes of the enemy.

"I can do nothing about what may happen on the other side of Gibraltar, or in the North Sea," he complained to Aimée heatedly. "Your requisitions travel through channels, but the supplies you need do not as easily pass through our enemy's minefields. Not one of every two supply ships reaches its destination. A vessel laden with medicines leaves an American port and disappears without a trace in the middle of the Atlantic. A ship sailing from Marseilles reaches anchor in our own harbor, only to be blasted into oblivion by German torpedoes. I send out smaller and smaller vessels—"

"Henri, please . . ." the reverend mother tried to interrupt, but the general was too carried away to listen.

"Smaller and smaller vessels, in the hope that perhaps a few will get through. But it does no good. Other routes are no better. Nothing can go overland through Greece, for the bandits and profiteers stop every train."

"Henri, *mon cher ami*, no one blames you for what you cannot control. My nephew Reynard de Beaudricourt, who is liaison from the Red Cross, complains that the Aegean is infested with mines, that the overland routes are impossible, and hence he cannot get me the anesthetics I need. Between the two of you, I lack too much."

She could hear the thwarted fury of the general's reply. "Perhaps after all you should have turned to One of higher rank for these favors that you ask of me, Sister. With His help you will receive your drugs and bandages. All that I can promise you is the canvas for your stretchers."

She sighed. "At this point, I suppose I must be grateful for that."

The general laughed ruefully. "To imagine that two such seasoned campaigners as you and I can do nothing more than scrape together a few rolls of canvas!"

"General, do not be so hard on yourself. Between us we have at least saved a few lives and given to a few the chance for a new life."

True enough, he conceded silently, though he took no credit for merely fulfilling his duty as a soldier of the republic and as a man. Yet in her words he recalled the strikingly beautiful young Russian girl found a year before in a doorway, shaking with typhus fever. "But then what worries you, my friend?"

The reverend mother sighed. "You are too smart, Henri, you understand before I can explain. Marina Lebedev worries me. Her wounds have not healed with time. The scars have merely covered them, and some strength forces her to go on in spite of the fact that at bottom she hates the life she leads. Each day she sees so much, so much death, and so much bleakness. Some women, Henri, are not made for such a life. I have tried to make her stop, to get her to rest, but she is deaf to my arguments. I must do something for her, Henri. If she stays here at St. Cyril much longer, she will break. I must find a place for her in this world where she belongs."

The high-ceilinged admitting ward of St. Cyril's Military Hospital was crowded. Gray-faced, sleep-weary doctors gave the newest patients a first, cursory examination, separating the routine cases from the more serious emergencies. Those cases requiring immediate attention—infected wounds, broken limbs, typhus, gangrene—went to the large open ward directly behind the admitting ward, to be attended by the nurses, stripped, and washed. The less pressing cases were simply ignored until one of the harried doctors found the time to attend to them. A third category—those who were already beyond the care and the abilities of human medicine—were attended by a priest.

Always the worst cases, the ones that would haunt the restless hours of sleep the nurses managed to find, were those from the Austrian front. From every army of the Balkans came truckload after truckload of wounded soldiers still in the bloodstained khakis covering mud-caked wounds. Old men and soldiers in the

prime of their manhood had been broken by unimaginable injuries. Stretcher upon stretcher sometimes lined the corridor to the main ward. Cases of gas blindness, head wounds, spinal cases—the toll of horrors went on day after day, without cessation. It was madness. Only the strongest could endure the knowledge of war's reality without breaking.

Marina Lebedev had been at St. Cyril's too long to be shocked by anything she saw. She threw herself completely into the work at the hospital, blocking off any emotion that might interfere with her efficiency or cause her to lose her calm composure.

Never did she allow her mind to dwell on anything that had happened before St. Cyril's. A girl had come into Salonika. She had been found by an aide to the French general in a doorway, shaken by the fever of typhus. She had been brought here. Those facts were without interest to her. They told the story of someone long dead. They had nothing to do with the life of Nurse Lebedev, the calm, contained woman who was afraid of nothing because nothing touched her.

When a patient died, she did not mourn or wonder what chapter of the human story had closed forever with his eyes. Fatigue would blot out every emotion, including weariness. Marina fell into her bed at night when her legs were too weak to hold her any longer, and she was too tired to dream.

She was the most unshakably competent nurse at St. Cyril's. The men in the wards watched her walk by in her crisp blue uniform, the white fichu covering her hair. She was skillful. Her fingers flew lightly over the dressings and she was kind to the wounded soldiers and the sick in the wards. But she was impersonal in her kindness—nothing about her invited confidences.

More than one man wondered about the beautiful young nurse with her large violet eyes that seemed at once so empty and so sad. How thin and delicate her face was, and she was so slender under her ill-fitting uniform. Her fragile womanliness contrasted sharply with her aloof attitude. She kept her distance and would not thaw.

She was made of steel, the doctors knew, so strong that it was a little unnerving at times. Would nothing reach her, nothing ever touch her? They wondered. Would nothing bring a light to her pale thin face, would nothing bring tears to those imperturbable violet eyes?



General Henri Serreuil was burdened by a profound uneasiness, the cause of which he could not understand. The arrival of the reserved, elegant young man who sat beside him on the soft leather upholstery of his staff car should have relieved his mind of his more pressing problems and allowed him to relax. But the general was aware of an unpleasant, menacing atmosphere that ran like an undercurrent beneath their conversation, and he did not like it.

Serreuil told himself that he and his guest were two different types of men, one who owed his allegiance to the military, and the other whose concerns in his role as liaison for the Red Cross between the warring nations were naturally less partisan. The general had met a few men in his time who had no sympathy with the military, and always evidenced an immediate dislike for anything to do with war. But this man, Reynard de Beaudricourt, was the essence of politeness.

As the low-slung Isotta-Fraschini curved through the crowded streets of Salonika, the general observed discreetly the quiet man beside him. The Red Cross official possessed the slender, elegant handsomeness of his French forefathers. His features were delicate. His slim nose flared into finely chiseled nostrils, and the



outline of the almost pretty face was finely molded. Thick black lashes fringed the blue eyes, and the general caught himself wondering why the smile that curved the corners of the small, delicately cut mouth never seemed to travel as far as the eyes.

Reynard sported an elegant mustache. It was a little larger than the current fashion, but the broad sweep of golden hair made the features appear even finer by contrast. Serreuil noticed that the mouth, which had at first appeared fragile, was in fact unusually small, and the lips were too thick and sensuous for the face.

As with so many of the bourgeois rich who had gravitated to positions of power in the Red Cross, or other international humanitarian commissions, Reynard was dressed with an expensive taste that spoke less of his function than of his breeding and his place in the world. His fine English riding boots were highly polished, and the light sand-colored gabardine trousers were exquisitely tailored. His jacket was a copy, an elegant variation of a soldier's tunic, the effect of the uniform being enhanced by the simple white patch of silk with the cross of red on the shoulder. Below it a number of discreet stripes were obviously meant to signify de Beaudricourt's rank. But the effect to the eyes of Henri Serreuil was comic and laughable. His guest reminded him of a drawing-room dandy in the musical-comedy version of military dress.

The car had picked them up at Serreuil's headquarters near the harbor, in the European quarter of the city. A splendid location, with a fine view of the picturesque port. From this elegant point of departure it was a tortuous forty-five-minute drive through Salonika itself before they scaled to St. Cyril's hospital on the heights above them. The general was trapped with this man who both intrigued him and irritated him. He suddenly wished that he had not closed the glass partition that separated him from his driver, a man whose innate common sense and soldierly attitudes would have been a much-welcome escape from Reynard de Beaudricourt. Serreuil tried to lose himself in the familiar scene that slipped by the windows of the long black staff car.

Rows of low whitewashed stucco houses, restaurants, and small expensive shops lined both sides of the street. French dressmakers, perfumers, and English haberdashers—Salonika reflected the cosmopolitan taste of its wealthy citizens. A few elegant ladies sat at the terraces of the cafés, sipping iced drinks, eyes shaded

beneath small brimmed hats. The bright colors of their silk dresses sparkled like the plumage of exotic birds. Many of the men were in uniform, but many were only in the varying uniforms of the wealthy.

Away from the center of Salonika the character of the streets changed. Here women stood in groups, staring at the passersby, calling out to the men.

A fat woman of undecipherable age sat on a stairway with her skirt rolled up to her thighs and her blouse open to reveal pendulous breasts. "See what you buy, see what I have," she called after a sailor. Her face was painted garishly, her eyes blackened with charcoal, and her mouth painted grotesquely red.

Others hung back against the buildings. Standing alone, these women waited silently for someone to notice them. They were different from the others. They did not call out good-naturedly to the men. Their faces were pinched and hard. The general knew that here, in these shadowy doorways, some of the noblest women of Europe plied the oldest trade in the world.

The slightly nasal, mellifluous voice of Reynard de Beaudricourt suddenly broke the silence of the car. "These sights," he said with obvious disgust, "remind me so much of what one is forced to witness in Constantinople."

The general looked at him now with an interest that was unfeigned, genuine. He forgot that he was not comfortable with his guest, that he did not like him as a man. Serreuil was a general first and foremost, and he desired to know everything he could about his possible foes in battle. And de Beaudricourt in his many dealings in the Turkish capital had become an expert of sorts on that Eastern enigma.

"But surely, Monsieur de Beaudricourt, the refugee problem in Turkey cannot be as serious as it is here," he replied conversationally, hoping that the younger man might be induced to talk freely. His hopes were well rewarded.

"As bad, *mon général*? It is far, far worse over there. Oh, I know that my dear Aunt Aimée complains of the press of cases, the thousands homeless in the streets, the disease that festers in the poverty the war has brought. But neither she nor you can imagine the situation in Constantinople."

"At least the actual fighting has not reached Turkey. The Turks must have been able to exercise some modicum of control over the . . . the civil situation." As always, Serreuil spoke with

difficulty of things nonmilitary, for he hated the role into which he had been cast. A damnable policeman, he fumed silently, that's what I've become, not a soldier.

"For that very reason it has become a mecca for exiles and refugees of every country of Europe," said Reynard. "Most especially since the internal tension in Russia has thrown the country in favor of the Bolsheviks. The Turks are overrun with the expatriates, and not just from Russia. Germans of course, and Austrians, as well as citizens of the Allied countries, though these men are mostly of the criminal class. Hoodlums. Rich aristocrats have escaped there, moneyed gentry without proper papers, merchants in exile, smugglers, murderers—all mingle there without the slightest interference from the police.

"These women too." Reynard waved a light finger at the prostitutes crowding together in the doorways. "Their counterparts are found in far greater numbers there. They are the dregs, the pathetic dregs, of the human race. Look at them, clinging to the shadows that surround them like a warm blanket. What man would ever want them? Look at them, hoping to entice some fool to part with his silver for the dubious privilege of sleeping with a former duchess." Reynard de Beaudricourt laughed, and the general shuddered and turned away.

The automobile left the wide, level avenue and began to climb toward the pink turrets of the hospital. The splendor of the Church of the Twelve Apostles came into view. The circular dome with its fabulous mosaics of birds and flowers in breathtaking blues, reds, and golds did not stir the general to admiration this afternoon. Nothing in the old city of Cicero and St. Paul moved him today as it usually did. He found that despite himself he had become vitally interested in the character of this poised and hidden man beside him. It was Reynard's coldness that intrigued him. Was it in the hands of this cynical creature to bring pain-staving drugs to the wounded?

"I admire the efficiency with which your medicine ships break through the German lines, Monsieur de Beaudricourt, and I have a common problem, but I appear to achieve much less success than you."

"The situations are not quite the same, are they, General Serreuil?" Reynard replied. "Of course the Germans and the Turks would try to stop your ships. They carry weapons of war. My own boats, few and ill-equipped as they are, sail on missions of

mercy and of salvation. The warring nations themselves sign pacts to recognize the need for an unfettered flow of drugs and medical supplies on the high seas. But there are men who do not sign gentlemanly treaties. They do not recognize any nationality but their own. With the chaos of the war, the seas have been thrown open to every profiteer, every pirate, every enterprising fisherman. The convoys of the Red Cross carry morphine, more precious now than diamonds—and much harder to find. It has also started to acquire a value on the black market that is beyond your imagination. Never since the pirate heyday of Tripoli have the seas been so inviting to adventurers, and the land routes have not yielded such treasures since Alexander."

"And what becomes of these stolen materials?" Serreuil asked.

"They are sold, quite easily. Along with the guns that you have lost from your own convoys. There are fortunes to be made by the enterprising. Here, in Constantinople, anywhere. Anything and everything is for sale. It is a world without morality, without bounds."

It was not what he said, which was, after all, undeniably true, but the way he said it, the relish with which he spoke that repulsed the general. Henri Serreuil hoped, for the sake of his old friend Sister Aimée de Beaudricourt, that his feeling of contempt and revulsion that suddenly welled up in him did not show on his face.

He caught the eye of the driver. The glass partition slid back.

"All due speed, Corporal. See if you can pass some of these hay wagons with a bit more dispatch. The reverend mother is expecting us in a few minutes."



"We are more grateful than I can say for the new shipment of supplies you bring to us," Aimée de Beaudricourt began formally when she had greeted her nephew. "The shelves of our dispensary were stripped bare before you came. I hope this will not be permitted to happen again. You understand that the supplies will not last us more than a month—if we are lucky. On the other hand, if we have another outbreak of typhus, another military fiasco, with the casualties spilling through our doors . . . well, in that case . . ." She spread her elegant hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"*Ma tante,*" Reynard protested, "I can promise you nothing more than my most diligent effort on your behalf."

Mother Aimée looked at him sharply, and in her glance he so clearly read the warning "That had better be so, young man," that he wanted to laugh. He felt like a little boy again. Besides, he had genuine affection for this fierce old woman. It was not merely for her title and education that she was in such a position of responsibility. Reynard thought of the portrait of his grandfather; she had the same strong, intelligent, determined face as the redoubtable old soldier who had served and intimidated his king to the point

where the monarch could hardly make a military decision without deferring to him.

He was left alone as the general and Reverend Mother Aimée exchanged a few words. Reynard stirred uncomfortably in his chair. His throat was parched with thirst.

"I wonder if I could ask a special favor of you, my dear Reynard," the reverend mother said, returning to where he sat. "One of our young nurses, a Russian girl . . ." Reynard's eyes sparkled with attentive interest, but he wished himself a thousand miles away. Another hardship story in which he was being asked to play the role of the intervening God, to save some poor soul. Godliness was not a role that suited him.

The reverend mother continued to speak. "A beautiful girl, who could certainly find a post somewhere—a woman requiring a companion, a governess. Surely a man in your position speaks to many people."

Reynard nodded absently. For some reason or other, the general also seemed involved in this story; from time to time he interjected a remark in favor of the girl. Reynard neither knew nor desired to know about their nurse. He was expected at tea with the British attaché; with a little luck he would have time to go back to his hotel and change after leaving the hospital.

But it seemed he was not to get off so easily. There was a gentle tap at the door, a soft footstep, the swish of starched petticoats. He looked up. The blandly polite look vanished from his face, and his eyes quickened with interest. By God, no wonder the general was especially interested in the girl: she was a beauty.

"My dear mademoiselle." Reynard bent over Marina Lebedev's hand with punctilious ceremony. He wished he had paid closer attention to his aunt's explanations. "I understand you are anxious to find some work that will allow you to leave Salonika."

The girl with the violet eyes nodded.

"Tell me about yourself."

Marina spoke quietly. It was not different from other accounts, but this girl did not speak with saccharine sentimentality. No idealistic sermons on the morality of battle. Marina gave a series of facts; situations appraised, understood, explained. A trained journalist could not have done it better.

Reynard was not so naive as to imagine, as did his aunt, that Marina would be best suited for the role of a governess. His luck

was beyond anything he could have hoped. Were they really giving up this woman into his hands so easily? Even in her plain uniform, her hair bound, and her face innocent of powder, she was beautiful, and a beautiful woman was a precious prize in the circles in which he lived.

He seemed to consider his aunt's request, to ponder his choices, though it was but an act. Then at last he turned to the girl herself. She had been hurt somehow; he saw that, something beyond what she had told him, but that did not matter to him. It only mattered that she be willing to go with him.

"Mademoiselle Lebedev, if I were to offer you some work with the Red Cross in their office in Constantinople, would you accept it?"

Her acceptance or refusal would not have been heard in the explosion of protest that came from Serreuil at the mention of the decadent Turkish capital. "Monsieur de Beaudricourt, you cannot imagine that I would permit Marina to go to that city, where no one is safe, nothing is held sacred. Your own description of the life there . . ."

"*Mon général*," Reynard replied in his most conciliatory and unctuous tone, "do you imagine that I would permit a young woman of Mademoiselle Lebedev's obvious sensibility and breeding to be alone in Constantinople, or any city for that matter? Let me assure you that she would be cared for as strictly and as tenderly as if you yourself were in charge of her well-being."

The general's eyes locked into Reynard's, and the soldier was afraid for Marina Lebedev.

What seemed a blessed chance, an offering for freedom and the sunlight she had not seen for so long, lay before her. Marina hesitated, and then gave one thought to the task that still was unfinished. "Monsieur de Beaudricourt," she said with distant politeness, "I know this is a chance to help you, to help the hospital. I don't know whether I can do more good in Constantinople than here, but it doesn't matter. I cannot leave Salonika. My time of service at St. Cyril's is not over."

The door closed behind the girl, and Mother Aimée saw the disappointment on Reynard's face.

But the matter was far from resolved. The emptiness in Marina's eyes had been too haunting to forget. How much longer would it be before she broke under the burden of her terrible suffering?

In the midst of sleep one night she was summoned to the wards. Marina Lebedev tied her clean surgical apron over her starched blue uniform and entered the operating room, taking her place beside the doctor silently, dutifully.

"There you are, Mademoiselle Lebedev," he said from behind his mask. "I am sorry to have called you here so late. But Nurse Beatrice was exhausted."

"I was not asleep, doctor," Marina said quickly. "It doesn't matter."

The stench of suppurating flesh seared the air. The patient's leg was infected, mottled green-gray with gangrenous poison.

The orderlies moved the patient quickly off the stretcher and onto the operating table. The man was sedated with a few drops of precious anesthetic. If the doctor worked fast, he would not awaken until he was back in his cot. The doctor wielded his scalpel quickly, cutting away the dead limb, disinfecting the flesh at the stump of the knee, where the leg was still good. He applied sulfa to the wound, and stanching the flow of blood. Calmly Marina handed him his gleaming instruments and the bandages. As the doctor fixed the bandage into place, the man began to stir.

"Poor devil," the doctor murmured to himself. "Just in time." With a sigh of relief and fatigue, he untied his gown. "Mademoiselle," he said in his clipped English accent, "when you are through here, I want you to check on one of the patients. He came in this afternoon. He speaks only Russian. He had a head wound and some shrapnel in his chest." The doctor shrugged helplessly. "Confidentially, I do not think he is going to pull through, mademoiselle, and I thought that he might be comforted to hear his mother tongue."

Marina nodded absently, slipping out of her apron. "Certainly, doctor. I will see him at once."

The dying soldier lay in a darkened ward. Very quietly Marina approached the narrow cot where he lay, his head bound with a bloodstained bandage. He was a big man, but even under the thin woolen blanket she could see how thin he was.

"Are you awake?" Marina whispered softly.

The man stirred at the sound of her voice. Russian in this foreign, desolate place?

"Mother of God . . ." His lips formed the words soundlessly. He turned from the wall and she saw his ashen face, gaunt under



the stubble of beard. His eyes flickered open, and a shock of recognition jolted through Marina.

"Chekalin," she whispered hoarsely. "My God, Chekalin." The sturdy, ruddy-skinned man who had befriended her in the cosack camp had become a shell of himself.

Chekalin's eyes burned with fever, and the hand that grasped hers was cold and damp with perspiration. "Marina," he exclaimed, "I've found you. I found you." His icy fingers tightened and he stared at her in dazed disbelief. His labored words came quickly, like fragments from a nightmare, but Marina understood it all. One name surged through her thoughts, and gave her new life. Sergei.

"Find her, find her, he kept saying to me. Loved you . . . transferred . . . Sixteenth Division . . . ambushed at Tarnopol . . . German tanks . . . flamethrowers. No survivors."

The brief hope that had been given her was cruelly snatched away. Sergei dead! Her knees buckled under her and she sat down abruptly on the hard wooden chair by Chekalin's cot. "Oh, Chekalin," she moaned, and very quietly began to sob. In her tears she at last felt the truth of her love for Sergei. The shell of cool, distant composure that she had built around herself gave way. Sergei had loved her. Through her willfulness she had lost him.

She stayed with Chekalin through the night. Even with her by his side, Chekalin grew weaker, his words fainter. This man on the stretcher was her last bond to Sergei Rogozhin, and Marina clung to every word Chekalin said.

He talked in spurts, between the bouts of shaking from the fever. In his delirium he was back in a Russia that no longer existed except in the memories of those who had known her before the war. Fields of wheat, fragrant hay, the warmth of a Russian summer.

For a moment Chekalin's eyes cleared, and the fever seemed to have momentarily receded. "I was there, I saw their battlefields and their dead piled onto each other like refuse on a dung heap. They are fighting each other now, Red against White, the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks. They tear Russia apart like a pack of wolves. Russian against Russian, brother against brother. They fight for power, not because they love the land. The fools, they have understood nothing."

He lapsed back into his fever, and toward morning he died.

With a steady hand Marina closed Chekalin's sightless eyes and folded his wasted hands on his breast. Brave old man, she thought. You were so kind to me. She pressed her lips to his forehead and pulled the thin blanket up over his face. "Farewell," she whispered.

Marina found her way up the stairs to the tiny room she occupied under the eaves. She did not know what unsuspected reserve of strength moved her limbs and kept her knees from buckling weakly under her. All her will was pitched in a desperate struggle to parry the river of emotion abruptly loosened within her. As she heard the latch click into place behind her, the hard, impenetrable facade of strength that was a sham gave way and she was swept away by a torrent of tears. Naked, helpless, and free, she pressed her burning cheek against the cool pillow and gave herself to the grief she had carried inside her, like a dead child, for so long.

For too long she had denied the truth that lived under her hatred for Sergei Rogozhin. He was as much a part of her being as the blood that ran through her veins. Behind the lie she had always wanted him. How could she have doubted the tenderness in those gray eyes, the soft smile that teased his lips when he looked at her? How she had longed for the touch of those lips on hers, those strong arms holding her fast, mastering her rebellion, the hands that brought her to a pleasure that was beyond pride, beyond shame.

She had waited for him, never believing in her secret heart that he was dead, lost to her forever. In all her time at St. Cyril's, it was Sergei for whom she watched, hoping against hope that he would be among the wounded that poured through the gates of the hospital. That by some miracle she would see him again, beg his forgiveness, and proclaim her love to him. Now it was too late. There would be no miracles for her. Sergei was dead, felled by a foreign gun, shot by an enemy patrol, his smiling eyes closed forever, all the laughter gone, his bones picked bare by the crows in the desolate landscape beneath an iron sky. It was too late. Sergei, she cried until her tears ceased to flow. Sergei, Sergei . . .

But at last she pulled herself upright and sat on the edge of the cot, her mind a whirling kaleidoscope.

It was life she wanted now. She wanted the baking heat of the sun on her skin, the soft caress of silk. She wanted to throw her-

self headlong into a whirlwind of light and laughter and pleasure. She wanted to forget pain and grief and lose herself in the ripe sensuality of the flesh. Where were the gay parties, the admiring men, the luxurious dresses, and the sparkling priceless jewels to set off her skin? Her beauty had been bartered for a life of pleasure once, but the pact with Viktor was made in innocence. Love and its loss had strengthened her—she was no longer the child that had fled into the wilds of her motherland. She was a woman. She would strike a devil's bargain again, and this time she would not lose. She would not cry again.

Marina stood, stripped herself of the blue nurse's dress that covered her like a prisoner's uniform. She peeled the white kerchief off her head and flung it to the bed. Her hands traveled over the soft skin of her thighs, across the firm swelling of her hips. Her fingers grazed her breasts, and she touched her dark, cropped curls. She could still be beautiful. Her violet eyes would sparkle once more, a life of ease would again touch her cheeks with a soft luminous glow, her lean taut body would become ripe and open beneath the heat of the sun. She would give her warm soft skin as a hostage to pleasure.

Constantinople! In the dark heart of that mysterious, mist-shrouded city a world of glittering uncertainty beckoned. But the past had taught her too much for her to fear the future, no matter the dangers it might bring.



The large, square bulk of the Hotel Metropole stands in the harbor quarter of Galata in Constantinople, flanked by rows of elegant counting houses and merchant palaces. At its feet ships of every nation are berthed and anchored in the blue waters of the ancient Aegean, a sight at once exotic and perpetual in this queen of maritime cities. The famous Taksim gardens sprawl before the Metropole; the elegant cypress-lined streets of Pera rise to the north and to the west.

The lines of the massive hotel, its high white facade, its long velvet-draped windows, its discreet brass accouterments, recall at once the splendid palaces of the princes of Renaissance Italy and the Belle Epoque which, a mere quarter of a century before, had spawned this impressive edifice. The ornamental carvings, the wreaths of stone garlands and flowers—victors immortalized in stone—the large square rooms, high-ceilinged and paneled in lustrous oak, bespoke the self-confidence and the imperturbable self-righteousness of the rich.

In Constantinople, in November 1917, the war was over, and the fruits of peace were at hand. Panting from the exhaustion of a long war, the East lay open to the army of profiteers and sophisticated scavengers who descended upon it from the four cor-

ners of an upended, ravaged world. Here were well-dressed, soft-spoken men with crisp mustaches, carefully brilliantined hair, and fresh red or white carnation boutonnières. Polished walking sticks, glittering monocles, and exquisitely cut English suits—the adventurers, smugglers, and profiteers who traded in everything from saffron to women were indistinguishable from their old-family predecessors. What they lacked in liaison, they made up for in money, power, and a silky sophistication of their own. Under the predatory smiles of these men lay a hard reality—they were hungry. Hungry for power, hungry for gold, hungry for the leisure and pleasure the war had denied them for so many years.

In the hushed, elegant dining room, Gerard Ruel sat alone at a table in the corner, enjoying an excellent gin and tonic. As he waited patiently for his dinner partner to arrive, he stretched his long, lean, booted legs under the crisp damask tablecloth that draped to the floor. He was a tall, dark-haired man in his early season of manhood—still young, but like so many who had witnessed the holocaust of the war at first hand, his face had lost the innocent glow of youth. There was an air of hard-earned cynicism about him, and even in repose his broad-shouldered body hinted at a vigilant alertness. He was well-muscled but lean, and the elegant dinner jacket and the dazzling white shirt set with discreet gold studs emphasized his saturnine handsomeness.

Stories of Ruel's wealth and daring were everywhere in the city. He had appeared in Constantinople almost a year ago, a handsome, mysterious stranger with a fleet of five ships and a modest reserve of money to back his venture into the shipping world. One by one he had outbid, outmaneuvered, and outwitted the old established firms. His ships were fast and reliable, and they had an almost uncanny instinct for avoiding the pockets of mine-infested waters and lurking German U-boats in the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coast, while the vessels of other, less-astute merchants limped painfully back into the harbor or sank off foreign coasts.

It was rumored that he had learned the shipping business in Marseilles; other stories hinted at a youth in a French province in India; some mentioned the seamy ports of South America; and one tale linked him with the gang that had ruled Cape Town before the war. It was all conjecture. For despite Ruel's being frequently seen at the races and at elegant soirees in the houses of

the rich, very few facts about him had come to light. Only one fact was clear to all: whoever he was, and from wherever he had sprung, Gerard Ruel was the undisputed master of the port of Constantinople. There was little to choose between the locked, guarded stone warehouses he had constructed on the piers and an armed fortress, and if the rough, loyal company of men who worked for Ruel at the docks were not in uniform, were they less his private army for that?

Ruel waved at the waiter and exchanged his empty glass for a fresh drink. He glanced at his gold pocket watch, snapping the delicate gold lid shut with an air of impatience and amusement. Nine o'clock. He knew his guest was deliberately making him wait—a gesture of high-handedness completely in tune with Tahir el Bayadim's princely manner.

Just at that moment a long-bodied gleaming Mercedes slipped to a stop in front of the Metropole. Tahir el Bayadim caused quite a stir as he crossed the lobby, where the elegant guests read foreign newspapers in armchairs covered in plush wine velvets. He was a man in his early-middle years, tall, well-built, breath-takingly handsome with the wide streaks of gray that crested at his temples and made a startling contrast to his black hair. His face was finely chiseled, the eyes cold and piercing under the wide forehead, the flaring nostrils and the generous mouth sensual and cruel. His mat skin and his broad cheekbones were the legacy of his Oriental forefathers; from the Europeans who had spilled their seed into his blood he had his height, his massive, muscled strength, and his pale, predatory, and ruthless green eyes.

It was rumored that he had aligned himself against Mustafa Kemal, who had the army as his own power base. Kemal had promised rules, order, and a better life, but the people themselves knew better, and those who showered Kemal's passing procession with flowers secretly clung to their fathers' ways. They loved the long, shiny automobiles of Kemal's parades, they ate the bread his soldiers distributed throughout the city in his honor, but they believed far more in the captains of the underworld who had always ruled their city than in this prophet of honor and the new age.

Tahir el Bayadim was just the sort of man the people of Constantinople had always placed in positions of power. He was as well known in the international circle of the social elite as he was in the army, where he held the rank of general, and where

his exploits during the war were legendary and proof enough in themselves of his qualities of leadership. Most interestingly of all, like the grand pashas who had ruled Turkey since time immemorial, Tahir el Bayadim knew the appeal and power of earthly delights. He was the most prominently powerful underworld figure in the city. On the outskirts of the city he owned a palace of magnificence—the residence of a former ruler which overhung the Bosphorus like an aerie out of the legends. Here Tahir ran a gambling house unequaled anywhere in the city in its resplendence. It was a popular meeting place, where men discussed and settled pieces of business that, like the life in Tahir's house, belonged to the night.

Tahir's house had the added attraction of offering the most beautiful women in all of Constantinople to the men who thronged there. Here were white women, dark-skinned beauties, yellow-skinned Oriental women, all exquisitely dressed, carefully trained to cater to every whim of the men who paid for their services. It was rumored that Tahir's women were abducted, sold to him, and held captive in the spacious ancient harem that adjoined the palace. Certainly the women did not appear unhappy, and if there was any truth to the stories of abduction, it only enhanced the appeal of the strong dark man who had so many beautiful women in his power.

This was the man who made his way to Gerard Ruel's table. If the less charitable spectators remarked to themselves that here was the meeting of the two most accomplished thieves and adventurers in all of Constantinople, no one said it aloud. Nor did anyone mention the two men who had entered the dining room in Tahir's wake and now took their places unobtrusively at either side of the door nearest the two men. It was an accepted fact that Tahir never traveled without his bodyguards close behind him, another trait reminiscent of the pashas but less an affectation than a necessity for a man who had more enemies than he could count.

"So, my old friend," Tahir began effusively as the two men took their places, "it has been too long."

Ruel smiled, matching the Turk's easy grace with his own. "A busy summer," he said, "for both of us. A profitable one for me, and for you as well, if what I hear is true."

Tahir shrugged. "Never trust your sources, my friend. Es-

pecially in this city. Only believe what you see with your own eyes."

"Touché—a sound piece of advice." Ruel raised his glass in mock tribute. "Let me say, then, *mon général*, that you are looking extremely well—like a man who has courted success and been welcomed into her bed."

Tahir's eyes twinkled and his laugh was deep and hearty. In a world that consisted largely of mediocre, unimaginative men, Tahir considered Ruel a peer. He enjoyed Ruel's sharp wit and his quick mind despite the threat Ruel's large fleet of vessels presented to Tahir's own ships. Tahir had been more than impressed by Ruel's warehouses and the fact that he had the courage to erect private buildings on the very docks of Constantinople. It was a prospect that would have intimidated a less purposeful man—given of course that such an innovative idea would have occurred to him in the first place, for the docks of Constantinople were notoriously rough, and more than one daring merchant had vanished in the dark port, never to be seen again.

Over the sumptuous supper of tender veal, braised *entrecôtes* and delicately seasoned vegetables, each in its own sauce, the Frenchman and the Turk made easy, casual conversation. Over the main fare they discussed the new mines recently developed by the Germans, and the increasing numbers of vessels ambushed by pirate ships and stripped of their cargo while the captain and crew stood by helplessly, at enemy gunpoint. The wines that accompanied the dinner were excellent, and in the companionable atmosphere of the well-appointed dining room, each man was more than slightly aware of the admiring, curious looks cast in their direction. Their conversation grew more and more cordial. They had a general respect for each other, for, personal likes or dislikes aside, each man recognized in the other a valuable ally and a redoubtable foe. The friendship was to the advantage of them both.

It was not until the coffee had been served and the liqueurs poured that Tahir undertook the conversation that was the real purpose of his meeting with the Frenchman.

"Ruel," Tahir began in an offhand manner, although both men knew the conversation had become serious, "I like you. I have watched you grow from an ordinary waterfront profiteer into the richest and most influential man in the harbor of Constantinople. The methods of your success—which I have studied



at length—do not displease me, and I am most favorably impressed by the results of your business." He paused to light a cigar. Tahir exhaled a fragrant puff of smoke and waved it away with an impatient gesture, and at once he moved to the heart of the matter. "Mustafa Kemal is weak. An idealist who dreams of great reforms and a golden age. A man who has no understanding of power. Turkey needs a strong man, a man who knows how to rule and who will not waste his energy and attention on patriotic, idealistic speeches. A leader."

Tahir's fist struck the table, sending the silver clattering. "A man like myself, Ruel. Already I have supplies of arms and munitions laid aside in preparation. Hidden throughout Turkey, in the hills, in the farmlands, in the mountains to the north!"

And throughout Constantinople, Ruel finished silently. My men have traced the contraband weapons you bring in on your ships from France to the cellars and storage rooms of every building you could commandeer for your purposes.

Unaware of Ruel's train of thought, Tahir continued. "I control the land, Ruel, I am master here, and all that remains is for me to give the word for the people to rise up against the Young Turks and their schoolboy heroes. With the weapons I put into their hands, it will be a swift revolution. We will attack when they least expect it, when they are the most confident. We will take them by the sheer force of our numbers. Kemal will beg for mercy at the end of a week."

Tahir paused and studied Ruel's face intently. It was an impassive, unreadable mask, the face relaxed, the eyes blank.

Tahir threw his head back and laughed. "I admire you—not a trace of emotion, not a gesture to indicate your reaction. My friend, you are truly a master of yourself. What a perfect criminal you would make."

Ruel allowed his features to soften into a smile. "If it is all so simple, then what do you need from me, Tahir el Bayadim?"

Tahir was suddenly very serious, all traces of levity gone. "You have the largest fleet of ships in the harbor, Ruel. Larger even than my own. I must not be vulnerable from the water. With you behind me, I have a navy as well as an army. I am not only well armed, I am invincible."

Ruel studied the stem of his liqueur glass, swirling the green Benedictine around the edges of the glass. He stopped rolling the snifter in his fingers and with a sudden gesture set it down sharp-

ly on the white tablecloth before him. His eyes narrowed and he studied the glass the way a chess master studies his check-mated king. You bastard, he thought. Do you think I will refuse when I know that your guns are piled in the seven towers of the Yedi Kule and the Tower of Galata overlooking the harbor? Do you think my men have not discovered the weapons you have concealed beneath tarps on the island of Kiz Kulesi? Do you suppose that I would expect to live for an hour after saying no? I can already see your guns pointed down at my ships, your thugs picking my men off the quay and the bridges of my ships like flies off a white wall. No, my friend, it is not to my advantage to fight you openly, but under the smile I show you, there is no love. I will be your ally, as you wish, but I will continue to pillage your weapons and send your Turkish opium to the French, and not to the Germans you have sold it to.

To Tahir he said, "An alliance with the devil, if I understand you correctly. The sea on one side, and your armies on the other."

"This is the age of the devil, Monsieur Ruel," Tahir said softly.

Ruel's eyes locked into his, and the Frenchman's eyes darkened. After a flicker of hesitation he said, "It will be an adventure, Tahir el Bayadim. I am with you."

"Good." Tahir's hand clasped Ruel's in a firm handshake. "Now," the Turk said, pushing back his chair, "you will join me at the villa for the rest of the evening, as my guest, of course. All business is concluded. The house will back you at the table, and I offer you the woman of your choice."



There was no mistaking the menace in his voice as Reynard de Beaudricourt clapped his hands together. "Like this," he said. "Like a butterfly between the pages of a book. A heavy, dull medical book," he added, and laughed. "If you disobey me, I shall crush you."

Marina blinked disbelievingly, her eyes fixed on the glass he held out to her. "Drink it, my dear girl, let's not have any fuss, if you know what is good for you."

She drank deeply from the glass that was raised to her trembling lips, her eyes never leaving Reynard's face. Defiantly she let the crystal drop to the floor, where it shattered into glittering fragments at her feet.

"Good." Reynard smiled coldly at her, ignoring with utmost control the outward sign of her rebellion. "Perhaps now you will feel more calm, less ready to agitate yourself over unavoidable matters. Agnes will dress you and bring you downstairs. I shall wait for you in the car, my dear."

The door that closed behind him sounded to her ears like the slamming of prison bars. Reynard's offer canceled a horror she would not have believed possible. To arrive in Constantinople, to be taken to his house and stripped of her clothes and her pos-

sessions the moment the heavy wooden door of his villa ground shut behind her, was to know the true helplessness of a prisoner. Nothing of her past life remained, not a scrap of clothing, not even a hairpin. Everything was gone—the faithful Agnes had seen to that.

Marina shuddered as the servant pulled a simple cotton shift over her head. The drug-filled drink Reynard had forced upon her began to seep through her veins, and she could already feel her body relax. With a mounting sense of terror she knew she would be completely defenseless against him, without the will to resist him. Her mind flew back to the city she had glimpsed as the vessel bringing them from Salonika slipped into the harbor. Constantinople was a sprawling confusion of twisted streets and narrow alleyways, as confusing and ensnaring as a labyrinth. She could never find her way through the maze of this city, so even if by some miracle she slipped out of Reynard's hands, she was lost.

Because it was a warm night, the roof of the car was down, and the sultry air sighed around the flex panels that protruded from either side of the windshield. The streets through which they passed were quiet and deserted, and as Reynard's polished boot pressed firmly onto the pedal, the car all but flew down the road. Marina felt her body growing heavier, as if she were in some sort of dream. They passed through avenues of fragrant, blossom-laden acacia and jasmine, and her head swam dizzily under the wave of exotic perfumes. The blood tingled warmly through her veins, and she let her head loll back onto the leather seat. The needle of the speedometer shot around the dial as Reynard brought the car around a sharp curve in the road. For an instant the lights of Constantinople flickered below them, mirroring the myriad sparks of light in the heavens. The smell of the sea was very strong, and at last they broke out from under the shaded avenue into a *rond-point* in front of an enormous marble villa.

"Get out," Reynard ordered sharply. Obedient and strangely calm, Marina stepped down from the car. As if by prearranged signal, the massive door swung open, and a small wizened woman in a black caftan motioned Marina to follow her. Mounting the steps that led into the house, Marina heard the car pull away, and she fancied she heard Reynard's mocking laughter ring out through the night.

The old crone led Marina through a yawning hallway so vast

it would have seemed cavernous had it not been for the thick Oriental carpets that covered the floor and the profusion of brass chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, shedding a warm, rosy light. Marina followed the black caftan up a long flight of stairs. The railing posts that supported the balustrade were carved into likenesses of naked women, every curve of their generous bodies polished into a satiny luster. Even under the gaining influence of the drug-potion, Marina noticed the voluptuous, sensual aura of the house, the meticulously carved figures, and the fragrant, heady perfume that filled the air.

They left a series of drawing rooms and wide-doored salons behind them, finally coming to a tall wooden door embellished with a bronze stud fashioned into animal heads. Two dark-skinned guards in turbans and flowing robes looming as tall as giants and armed with pikes flanked the door on either side. Jeweled scimitars blazed in their belts. Silently they parted the doors.

Marina gasped when she saw the room beyond. It was very large, decorated with Oriental sumptuousness that married color and textures in a brilliant array. Everything here was designed to delight the eye and seduce the senses with the rich luxury of a dream. Exquisitely woven rugs were strewn about the floor. The walls were covered with tiles of blue-and-white faience depicting lovers in every kind of intimate embrace. Marina saw the tiles and at that moment she guessed what lay ahead. She froze at the shock of the realization. She stood as still as the ebony statues on the balustrade. So this was the life Reynard had so blithely promised her in Salonika! This was the escape he offered her. She had followed him because she had been confident that she could best him at his own game, use him to her own ends, and through him as intermediary, gain for herself a real freedom. Now she was seeing the finality of his betrayal and the extent of her folly. In this charnel house she would be no more than a piece of flesh to barter for a crumpled note, a gold coin. How foolishly vain she had been to believe that she would outwit danger in this perilous city. But even as these thoughts whirled through her mind, a new, unsuspected calm took possession of her. So be it. She had nothing to lose, no love, no honor. A hard core of steely strength quashed her fear. Whatever her new master demanded of her, she would do; whatever the trials and rigor of this house, she would bear them; and in the end, she would not break, she would triumph.

"Wait." With that single word the old crone vanished through a shadowy doorway, and a young girl came toward Marina. Her hair was covered with a silk scarf, and her turquoise caftan was embroidered with gold thread. It hung loosely around her body. Jewels sparkled at the girl's neck and wrists, and a heavy ring of keys dangled from her fingers.

Marina did not know how long they followed the maze of twisting passageways, for she was too sleepy now to keep track of where she was, and even had she not been weakened by the drug, she could not have kept her bearings through this fortress of twists and turns. If the woman had turned and set her free, Marina would not have known in which direction to flee. At last they stopped before a low, narrow door. The girl twisted a heavy key in the lock and motioned Marina to proceed into the room.

The small, bare cubicle was as innocent of furniture and decoration as a prison cell. The cold marble suddenly chilled under Marina's feet. The key grated harshly as, without a single word, the girl locked the door behind them and motioned to Marina to step out of the rough shift Reynard had given her.

Obediently Marina let the dress slip to the floor, and she stood naked. With impressive attention the girl examined the gentle firmness of her breasts and shoulders, her slender waist, the long sweep of her golden belly where it plunged into a lustrous triangle between her gleaming thighs. Marina blushed ashamedly before the scrutiny of this silent girl. But all at once the girl's face lost its hard, unreadable mask, and then she smiled. With a shock of surprise Marina saw how young she was.

"My name is Mirah," the girl announced in laughing, lilting French. "You are very beautiful. Monsieur Reynard has chosen well." A spark of light danced in her lustrous, wide-set eyes. Mirah's skin was softly dusky, and her mouth had an uncommon sensuality.

"Where am I?" Marina demanded.

Twin dimples trembled in Mirah's cheeks. "I see you have been told nothing. Do not be afraid. We all belong to Tahir, he is our master. He cares for us, and in return we obey him."

"Obey him? Why? Who is this man? Why am I here? Tell me!"

Mirah shrugged carelessly and smoothed the silk of her caftan. "We are beautiful. Our duty is to please. Our bodies are vessels of delight, and we are the keepers of pleasure. If you please our

master, Tahir, your life will be an easy one. You will have fine clothes and fine jewels to wear."

"And if I do not please him?"

Mirah paled and made a slicing motion across the base of her throat. Marina shuddered. With a cry of compassion, Mirah laid a restraining hand on her arm. "You are very beautiful. A man would have pleasure just to touch you. You will please our master."

Mirah pressed her fingertips along a faintly visible seam in the wall, and a hidden door swung back to reveal a large chamber that smelled of perfumes and ointments. Mirah pushed Marina through ahead of her, and led her to a tiny blue-and-white-tiled bath with a long marble-topped table. A faceless, anonymous woman in a simple cotton caftan, her head wrapped in a cotton scarf, padded unexpectedly up to the table. She rubbed a handful of rough grains into her wet, strong hands and with vigorous motions worked the grains over Marina's skin. From her heels to the back of her neck, from her wriggling feet to the slope of her shoulders, the old woman missed nothing. Marina's flesh burned under the abrasive grains. "You will soon get used to it." Mirah laughed encouragingly. "It will make your skin as soft as silk."

At last the old woman finished her work. Pitchers of icy water splashed over her smarting skin. Then she was rubbed with rough towels, and as she wrapped herself gratefully in them, the old woman sponged off the marble table, dried it with a cloth, and placed a leather mat upon it.

Two women gave Marina an oil massage after her bath. They rubbed the fragrant oil into her back, on the soles of her feet, and into the delicate skin of her arches. When she turned onto her back, Marina peered at the room surreptitiously through her lashes. It was bigger than she had thought at first, a spacious, high-ceilinged room lit by braziers in the wall.

Then she saw it. There, in the lofty dim heights of the ceiling, there was a window, which she guessed at once did not connect to the outside, but rather served as a discreet but all-seeing vantage point from which one could observe the room below. A shudder of anticipation ran along Marina's spine. He was there, the man she had been brought here to please and at whose mercy she lived. She knew that this man's eyes had been upon her from the moment Mirah had brought her into this room, and she realized that she had had an uncanny feeling that she was being

watched from the start. She knew that for as long as she was in this house, her every move would be observed, and that she must appear docile or end her days at the bottom of the Bosphorus.

She lay quietly under the hands of the women as they polished her skin to a silky luster. Even when she realized that no part of her body was to be spared by the touch of their deft fingers, she did not resist, having guessed only too well what the price of her defiance might be. She closed her eyes and gave herself to the caress of the massage as she would have given herself to a man.

When the two women had polished Marina's skin until it gleamed like marble, Mirah rouged the tips of her breasts so that the areolas were dark and glistening. Mirah darkened Marina's eyes with kohl and brushed her hair until it was soft and glossy. Marina's mouth was stained with a clear oil that made it shine redly. She was then dressed in a robe of iris-blue silk embroidered at the hem and sleeves with flowers of tiny seed pearls. It crossed loosely in the front and was held closed by a narrow gold belt. The clasp was a single large red stone cut in a brilliantly faceted circle and set in a corolla of perfectly matched pearls. The robe plunged open to the waist and parted below the belt at the slightest motion to reveal the curve of the belly and the long, slim lines of her thighs.

From the first instant Marina laid eyes upon Tahir el Bayadim, she thought of a sleek, elegant cat, its graceful body relaxed but ready to spring into quick and ruthless action. There was cruelty in his green eyes and in his hard, generous mouth. She stood before him in the sumptuous, intimate chamber where Mirah had brought her. Tahir lolled gracefully on a silk divan, undeniably elegant in his black trousers and a close-fitting black vest. His silk shirt was open at the neck, and it was clear that even though he reigned in this secret empire as omnipotently as the earlier pashas had reigned in their harems, he divided his life between this Eastern delight and a Western way of life outside the precincts of this haven.

Tahir beckoned to Marina and patted a silk pillow beside him. Pretending not to notice that the robe billowed open with every step she took, Marina crossed to him and sank obediently down beside him. This was the man she was to please, who could do with her what he wished. A man like this would break her if he guessed her fear—he would grind her under his heel if she did



not obey him, but unless she rose to every challenge he might set before her, she had no chance to be anything more than the other courtesans he kept behind these walls.

Summoning up her last reserve of courage, Marina forced herself to look Tahir full in the face, her eyes unwavering and devoid of fear. She saw a flash of approval in his eyes and knew that she had begun well.

The women of the villa came from obscure reaches of the Balkan countries, from the craggy hills of Greece, from the peasant villages of India. All had two things in common—extraordinary beauty and a clear understanding of the obey-or-die condition that ruled their lives. Tahir spoiled them with sweetmeats and jewels; their lives were luxurious and easy for as long as they were docile. Tahir looked at Marina with interest. Unless he was mistaken, this one would have to be watched closely until she had proved that she was ready to obey.

Tahir snapped his fingers, and a manservant appeared with a tray of cooled drinks in tall glasses. Marina drained the contents of her glass without even a second's hesitation, even though she guessed only too well that it contained a substance to further undermine her strength. In fact, she almost welcomed the dulling fog of a drug, and she let herself slip into dreamlike detachment without a struggle. The lights in Tahir's salon were low, and the brilliant colors of the silk and sparkling cloths melted and fused into a rainbow of unearthly, magical hues. Three men sitting cross-legged by the wall played soft music on stringed instruments; everything conspired to lull the senses into a pleasant state of receptiveness.

Later, the little she could remember of that first night with Tahir seemed like a dream. And when she learned the ways of Tahir's house, she knew that her instincts had served her well, for in resisting, she would have disappointed him and paid for it with her life. Her measure of this man's ruthlessness had not been mistaken. Certain events of that first night escaped the hold of her memory, or perhaps did not penetrate beyond the dulling wall of the drug, but other memories returned to her in elusive fragments.

She remembered the silvery sound of the tambourine and the soft jingle of finger symbols. A woman was dancing. Her voluptuous, graceful body undulated provocatively under her gossamer veils. She throbbed and writhed to the music, and it seemed that

the sound and the woman were one. Sweat trickled between her full, glistening breasts and on her hard, flat belly. Marina watched in fascination as the woman approached Tahir and knelt at his feet. He stroked her like a cat, the tips of his fingers tracing small circles onto her bare skin. Marina followed the lazy, deliberate path of his lean, veined hands, and suddenly her belt was unclasped and those same hands were stroking her naked skin. She writhed under his touch, abandoning herself to him because she knew she had no choice, and because under the magic of his touch her blood turned to fire and she was past shame.

Tahir's dark face with his catlike eyes was above her, his cruel mouth crushed her lips, and as he plunged into her, the last shred of Marina's conscious will gave way before the onslaught of ecstasy.



The house where Reynard de Beaudricourt had abandoned Marina Lebedev was in reality one of the finest villas on the shores of the Bosporus. It had stood at the top of a high cliff and dominated the narrow pass beneath since the early seventeenth century, when Muhammad Pasha, a ruler of energetic ambitions, commissioned a palace worthy of his might. It was built in the shape of a very large square, around a central court. A series of long, low houses sheltered the women in small groups, and each of the houses was presided over by an older, more experienced woman who was at once their guardian and their teacher. She kept a strict eye upon the women in her care, seeing to it that each girl performed the light household task assigned to her, and punishing any infraction of the rules swiftly and impartially. The disobedient and the quarrelsome were whipped publicly, and often the humiliation stung more than the lash.

Fragrant gardens extended around the dwellings, and at the outer reaches of the circumscribed square, a high wall shut off the women's quarters from prying eyes. The women strolled through the verdant gardens at their ease, and tripped gaily back and forth over the tiled entrance to the baths and the steam rooms.

Marina lost track of the days of her apprenticeship. And even as she struggled against the tide of her senses, Marina could feel herself slipping deeper and deeper into the acquiescence of the dictates of her body. It was impossible not to succumb to the pleasant routine of this household.

Marina often slept until the late morning, waking only as the noon sun crept through the wooden shutters. A turbaned servant brought her breakfast—sweet rolls and fragrant coffee, along with a bowl of perfect fruit from the arbor in the garden. Her room was bare except for a low, wide bed with an embroidered spread and a riot of gay pillows strewn over it. One wall was covered with a mirror. The windows faced the water, and through the stone latticework Marina could see the rooftops of the city.

During the hot afternoons she opened her silk robe and offered her body to the sun, luxuriating in its healing warmth and the long-forgotten softness of silk on her skin. When the sun became too hot, Marina shed her silk pegoir and splashed in the cool waters of the pool with the other women. Over the weeks, Marina became aware of the change that was coming over her. She saw her body in the glass on the wall of her room, and she knew that it had acquired a new pride, a new suppleness, that it had never possessed before. There was a quality she could not describe about her now, a blatant consciousness of her own beauty that made her appear naked, even under the silk robes she wore. Her skin glowed incandescently and there was an alabaster smoothness to her limbs. Hers was a sensual, proud womanliness, the unfettered, unbroken triumph of the female over her flesh that belongs to those who have glimpsed the power they carry within them.

She thought of Tahir as she gave herself over to the soothing magic of the masseuse's hands, no longer pulling back from the more intimate touches that had shocked her at first, but rather welcoming them as part of the new delight she took in her body. How far away the half-starved, frightened girl in Salonika seemed. All that mattered to her now was the pleasure she found in Tahir's caress.

He had come to her room every night since her initiation into the rites of his house. She took pride in the knowledge that he desired her above all the beautiful creatures at his disposal. She responded to the sensuality of this powerful man and gave herself

to him without restraint, knowing that her power over him lay in her complete submission to his will.

She did not protest when one night he forced her to kneel and she felt his hands spread her buttocks and the hard spear of his flesh open her where she had never been taken before. Her body stiffened under him, and she screamed. But his muscled forearm only tightened against her waist, and he held her fast against his passion. She writhed helplessly as he buried himself deep inside her until only the hilt of his member prevented him from going farther. Then he began a series of long, deep strokes, and suddenly Marina was no longer fighting him. She opened herself to this new caress and rode the rhythm of his thrusts, desiring only that he take his pleasure with her. He stroked the hard tips of her swaying breasts and fondled the pink cleft between her thighs, parting the lips at the mouth of her womb, slipping his fingers into her, building her desire for him to a fever point, until at last the release came and she collapsed beneath his force. But Tahir followed the involuntary, jerking motions of her body and plunged into her ripeness with hard, rapid thrusts that sent a fire coursing through her loins, and she sank once more into the maelstrom of her senses.

Marina did not need to be reminded that as Tahir's favorite she was the object of considerable jealousy among the women, and she was not unaware of the fact that in time she would be asked to pay for this mark of honor. As pleasurable as life could be within the confines of Tahir's house, the women's quarters were not void of jealous intrigue, and Marina knew only too well that there was a price attached to Tahir's singular mark of honor. She also knew that whatever lay in store for her in the hands of the jealous women, she could never breathe a word of it to Tahir—for that would be weakness and Marina was well aware that part of her hold on him lay in her strength. Stripped of strength, the offering of her will to him meant nothing. Whatever was to come, she would have to deal with alone.

It was Mirah who first warned her of the danger to which she had been blinded. They were walking together in the gardens when a look of alarm crossed Mirah's face. The girl was staring in helpless fear into a shadowed archway beyond them.

Marina followed the direction of her friend's gaze with a cold sense that the safety of her world had been shattered. She saw not a fearful apparition, but a woman of incredible beauty with

the figure and bearing of a goddess. Marina had never seen this woman before, but she knew in that first moment why this was, and who the woman must be. She had not seen this creature because she had been separated and hidden from the others by Tahir. It was her rival.

"Tell me her name," Marina demanded in a strangely calm voice, staring back fearlessly at the beautiful woman.

"Sidonia," Mirah whispered tremulously. "She—"

"I know," Marina said, and she returned to the cold, direct stare of her enemy.

Just as the beauty of her rival, Sidonia, was breathtaking, so her costume had been chosen to display her charms unashamedly to whoever might look upon her. Even by the standards of the villa, where the women dressed with startling immodesty, Sidonia's vestments were daring. A heavy silken fall of blond hair draped over one shoulder and barely concealed the opalescent creaminess of heavy, thrusting breasts. Her green eyes, glittering in hatred of Marina, were outlined with blue kohl, and even the strained set of her mouth could not hide the full warm softness of her ripe lips. The graceful line of her neck was accentuated by a band of gold which caressed the pearly skin of her throat. The beauty of her limbs was unadorned by any other jewelry, and only a draped skirt of painted silk that opened gracefully over the proud line of her thighs covered her.

"She is worthy of him," Marina said aloud, but in a voice so low and so filled with steel that it shocked Mirah. "But he is mine. I will not lose my place here."

"Do not misjudge her vengeance, Marina," her friend warned her, pulling her away with a desperation that gave her new strength. "She will do anything to convince the master that you have betrayed him. Even Tahir might believe her unless he has proof that you are loyal to him. Be on your guard always."

Even from the start, Marina had understood that the hashish was the iron hold Tahir had on his women, the instrument that more effectively broke their will than the most rigorous whipping, and bound them irrevocably to him. Mirah filled the pipe with a deft, practiced economy of motion that came from a long experience with hashish, which was readily available to the women in Tahir's house, for he had found that it awakened them to sensual pleasure and kept them docile in their reveries at the

same time. Under its influence, the laws of Tahir's house melted into a set of very pleasant circumstances and the last dreams of freedom fled before the dreamlike coloring of the drug. Besides, the drug banished all pretense of modesty, and the courtesans used it freely before they entered the world of the salon.

One afternoon several weeks after her first warning, Mirah summoned her into the garden, and the two women sat alone with the jeweled pipe between them. "Be careful," Mirah warned her friend as she bent her head over the bowl of the pipe so that the other women in the garden could not see her lips moving as she spoke. "Sidonia has boasted that she will break you before the new moon is risen. She says that your pride will break you, and a few words into Tahir's ear will suffice to show him that you have risen above your station in this house. If she can convince him, it will go hard for you . . ."

Mirah's words sent a prickle of fear through Marina, and breaking her own rules, she took a deep breath from the pipe. Marina could imagine Sidonia's silken voice pouring out her thinly veiled accusation in honeyed tones: "She brags about her power among the women . . . she claims you are her slave, she mocks you behind your back." Yes, Sidonia was too clever to be outwardly antagonistic; she would plant the seed of doubt in Tahir's mind, and then, pretending to defend Marina, it would be Sidonia herself who would invent a humiliating test of Marina's loyalty.

Marina did not love Tahir, but without him she would become just as the other women, indulged during the day but sent down to the salons to entertain and gratify the desires of the men who frequented Tahir's house. In the villa there were those who were reserved for distinguished guests, old friends, or important acquaintances of Tahir, and those who were given to any man who could pay Tahir's price. Sidonia would try to break her down to the lowest rank. Marina's nights would be spent in the embrace of the lowliest creatures that passed through the doors of the villa. It would be that, or death. She must think quickly and find a way to outwit her rival in this most perilous struggle for power.

A girl, Kazi, whom Marina had noticed but never exchanged more than a few laughing words with in the pool or in the steam room, when the servants washed and massaged the women, sat down beside Mirah, and a tall blond-haired woman joined the

group a few minutes later. Marina looked at her with interest. She was truly beautiful, as pale as a saint, and almost as shy, despite the evident sensuality of her body. She was one of Tahir's best women, one reserved for his favorite customers.

The four women were dressed in loose silk peignoirs, brilliantly colored and embroidered in Oriental patterns. Marina's robe was red silk, which set off her dark hair and her eyes. A richly rendered gold dragon twisted his way down the front of her robe into a foam of seed pearls that decorated the hem of the garment.

It was a warm, sultry afternoon, and the women sat gracefully under the shade of the ancient acacia tree. The air smelled of fragrant blossoms and a hint of the sea. Kazi smiled shyly at Marina and chatted with Mirah. Her robe hung loosely open, and as she bent forward to put her lips to the mouthpiece of the pipe, Marina saw that her breasts were full and slightly pendulous, in the purest lines of the voluptuous beauty of which so many of the customers were so fond. Suddenly Marina noticed a gleam of gold at Kazi's breast, and she blinked and gave a startled cry of surprise. A tiny ring, as delicate as a child's earring, pierced the nipple of Kazi's breast, the dull sheen of the gold startling against the soft patina of the girl's dusky areola.

Marina felt the blood drain away from her face as her own breasts throbbed tenderly under the thrust of the imagined needle. Kazi saw her startled look, and laughing, she slipped her silk robe off her shoulders, exposing her torso and her naked breasts.

"Beautiful, no?" She laughed proudly, cupping her breasts in her hands.

Marina pulled hard on the pipe and nodded at Kazi. Her mind whirled toward a conclusion, which she knew instantly could be her salvation from Sidonia's jealous plots, but which made her shudder with dread. Marina braced herself for what she knew she must do.

That night when Tahir came to her, she had smoked enough hashish to beg him, without betraying the fear she felt, to mark her as Kazi was marked.

Tahir's dark eyes fixed her impassively, as if he could not believe his ears and did not understand what she wanted of him. Then suddenly his face relaxed, his eyes softened, and Marina saw his finely chiseled mouth relax into a smile. His lips whis-



pered over her mouth and touched the satiny creaminess of her neck and the swelling roundness of her breasts. His eyes never left her as he bent over her and the gold needle she held out to him flashed in his hand. The pain shot through Marina hotly, burning darts of fire as she screamed. But even as Tahir's hands hurt her flesh, and even as his reverent lips caressed her, she was filled with a feeling of triumph and she remembered the hatred in Sidonia's cold, beautiful face. I have won, I have won, Marina cheered jubilantly to herself. He must trust me now.

"Marina . . ." Tahir's voice held a new note of tenderness and his hands were gentle as he brushed the tears from her cheeks. He gathered her hair in handfuls around her face, running his fingers through the dark sea of misty curls. With this irrevocable wounding of her flesh she bore his stamp forever. And yet, how strange, Tahir thought, looking down at her slim, delicately rounded body, that in giving her perfect beauty to him to alter with his mark, she had become still more beautiful because more vulnerable.

With infinite tenderness Tahir caressed her, teasing his hands on her soft skin until she was lost to the pain in her breasts, to the light, uneasy pressure of the small gold rings, to everything but the pleasure of his touch. He stroked her belly, delicately tracing the curve of her silky skin. Her body began to throb and her back arched upward in response to his touch and her hips swayed back and forth of their own accord as flashes of hot fire licked through her loins. He plunged deep into her, only releasing her when he had felt her body surge around him and she moaned helplessly under his strength. "My darling, my darling," he murmured, and he too gave way under the wave of their passion.

Marina's position as favorite was indisputable now. In fact, she enjoyed all the privileges of the kadims in the pashas' harems. She was given a large suite of rooms of her own, a salon, a private dining room, and a large bedroom that opened into a wide terrace overlooking the swirling Bosphorus. Her quarters were furnished with exquisite rugs and silken sofas and tables inlaid with precious woods and ivories—a far cry from the small bare room that had been her cell previously. And when Tahir came to her, he dined with her and she knew that he enjoyed her company as well as the delights of her bed. She could feel his confi-

dence in her growing, for although he never permitted himself to discuss the intricate aspects of his outside life with anyone, she knew that he was in fact treating her as his mate, his equal, as well as his paramour. And in the softness of Marina's carved bed, in Tahir's strong arms, and under his masterful tutelege, Marina learned the full power of sensuality.

She was in her own power now, truly a queen among the women in Tahir's house, beyond the jurisdiction of the women, of the older servants in whose charge the girls lived. She of all the women in Tahir's household was exempt from any work—by his orders, she alone had two servants waiting on her in her rooms, and special masseuses assigned to her, whose only task was to groom her and keep her skin supple and glossy. And she alone was not sent down to the salon to flirt with the guests and to service the men who came to Tahir's salon.

But, Sidonia, cast aside and jealous, was not idle. Thanks to Mirah's reports, Marina knew that the deposed favorite was protesting loudly among the women that Marina did not go down to the salon with the others because she felt herself too proud to give herself to other men, even for the sake of Tahir. And what if Sidonia's words reached Tahir? Marina wondered. She could not lose Tahir's trust. No, not now. She needed that, not only for the power it gave her now but also for the power she must have if she were ever to rise out of the harness of Tahir's household. Besides, Marina had come to feel something for Tahir, which while it was not love, was born out of a passion that is akin to love. It was all she had, and to lose it now was to lose everything. Marina gnawed the side of her thumb thoughtfully as she stared out at the city beyond the wall of private green. One day she would walk through those streets, a free, rich woman, with power. One day she would hire a passage out of Constantinople on one of those ships that lay snuggled closely together in the harbor. To France, to Italy, as she was to have done with Albrecht, to start there a new life as a free woman. And so she went to Tahir with her offer. She would go to the salon.



Marina could not suppress a sign of pleasure as she studied her reflection in the glass. Two days ago a seamstress had come to measure her, and now from the collection of gossamer gowns, daringly designed to reveal her body more than to hide it, Marina had chosen a frock of pale lavender. She had lived so long in the loose caftans and flowing silks of the harem that the closely cut European dress made her feel provocatively naked. Yes, she thought not without a flash of satisfaction, she was beautiful. All traces of the scrawny, frightened creature who had been sent here by Reynard de Beaudricourt were gone. In the place of that forlorn creature stood a full-bodied, voluptuous woman who knew the strength of her own power and who was not a stranger to the delights of her own body.

The subtle shade of the gown complemented her eyes and highlighted the opaque translucence of her skin. Her dress was silk crepe de chine, sleeveless and with a daringly low décolleté. Beneath it she wore a delicately boned corset which emphasized her slim waist and raised her breasts, setting off their round fullness to advantage. Marina had waited apprehensively as the servant slipped the outer dress over the corset, hoping that the sheer fabric would offer her some protection for while she had

displayed her gold rings with pride among the women, she shuddered to think of how the men in the salon would stare at her naked breasts. There, Marina breathed a sigh of relief as the frock settled into place. The tips of her breasts were mere shadows now, the gold rings indiscernible. Marina looked at herself pensively. Sparkling crystal beads twinkled at the neck of her dress and were embroidered in a zigzag pattern at the hem of her gown. She slipped on pale silk stockings and fastened them with ribboned garters. The maid held out a pair of lavender silk pumps, and Marina stepped into them. The line of her buttocks and her slim hips was emphasized by the added height of the narrow heels. Marina's hair floated freely around her alabaster face in a cascade of curls held back only by a diamond comb. Diamond drops, a present from Tahir, sparkled in her ears. The mirror reflected a creature of imperial stature and queenly grace, a woman to be desired, courted, pursued, a woman who had power over men—not a creature whose body was at the easy disposal of her master and any man he wanted to give her to. Would Tahir sell her, or offer her tonight, or tomorrow? How far would he test her? Would it please him to have her satisfy the lust of the adventurers and gamblers who filled his salon? She did not know, but she could not turn back now.

When the maid had darkened Marina's eyes with kohl and stained her mouth with vermilion from a small ceramic cosmetic pot, she rouged Marina's pale cheeks. Then she applied a light dusting of rice powder to emphasize the white perfection of Marina's shoulders. Waving the maid aside, Marina carefully applied a few drops of heady perfume to her temples, her slim wrists, the back of her knees, and the space between her breasts. She took a last cursory look at herself in the glass, and drawing in a deep breath to steady her nerves, she left her room to join the other women in Tahir's salon.

The salon was an enormous room—or rather a series of rooms spilling one into the other. They occupied the entire first floor of the front of the ancient pasha's palace, and each room was sumptuously decorated with ornate wainscoting and plush, plump sofas. Opening off the main rooms were smaller, more intimate salons, where one might discuss business matters or where the customers enjoyed the flirtatious advances of Tahir's skillful courtesans. There was a large gaming room, where the croupier called the games in a singsong French and spun the wheel

embedded in the long table. Beyond this room were the card salons, where the gamblers tested their luck and sharpened their wits. Fortunes had been made and lost at the green-baize-topped tables, and the guards at the door of the card rooms were a decorative but grim reminder of the fights that had broken out in the heat of the game.

Toward the back of the main salon was an ornate grille beyond which lay the lavishly appointed bedrooms where the women led the men who had paid for their company. Laughing coquettishly, the courtesans smiled up at their men, old, young, handsome or not, as indifferent to the appearance of their prospective lovers as they were to the demands made upon them by these men—for in Tahir's salon the women were not allowed to refuse a man, and having accepted him, they were trained to satisfy even the most unusual caprices. In the garden of the women's quarters Tahir's women exchanged stories and laughed over the things they were often forced to do to humor their customers, but under the easy laughter was the hard reality that these women had no choice but to cater to every whim of Tahir's guests and to the orders of Tahir himself.

Marina moved through the elegant scene with a sureness and a grace that drew every eye to her. The strangeness, the danger, and the air of tension that hung like a web of smoke over the muffled sounds of conversation and the sparkle of light in the opulent salon did not frighten her. Once she would have been in awe, but no more. Even the grandeur of St. Petersburg, the arrogance of moneyed nobility and the complacent bigotry of those who had ruled there, was nothing beside this.

The years of pain and frightened running that had brought her here had formed her. The smugglers, thieves, and generals that watched her with lustful appraisal were no different from those who had wanted her, yet mocked her, in the unattainable world she had bargained for. But she was no longer unsure, no longer reaching for a love that would shatter her with its loss. Left for her were only the desires of men. Their need and the power of her beauty were her reward. She knew that she wanted nothing else.

Marina would rule here, reign as queen by Tahir's side, just as she was to have reigned by the side of Viktor, Count Rogozhin. And as Marina stood in the doorway of Tahir's salon for the first

time, she resolved that no test he put her to would cause her to falter.

Tahir saw with pleasure how eagerly the men responded to her. In a strange way, perhaps because of the bond of trust that had been wrought by her willing and visible submission to him, it pleased Tahir to watch her display herself before the admiring adventurers and profiteers. His eyes lingered on the smooth creaminess of her throat, on the curve of her long slender legs. He smiled in anticipation as he watched her. Tonight he would press his lips to her dark, fragrant hair and her silken eyes, intoxicating himself with the womanly scent of her perfume. He was proud of her, with a pride that verged on love. She was not his slave, but his consort. His mind was filled with the sight of her superb beauty. Only in the powerful freedom of his sleekly muscled racehorses had he ever glimpsed the natural force that she exuded.

"How beautiful you are, my darling," he murmured as she paused in her rounds to slip her arm through his and rub her cheek against his shoulder.

Marina smiled mysteriously and pressed herself slightly against him. "Do I make you happy, my love?" She sighed, and then added teasingly, "Are you going to give me to another man tonight?"

"Don't press your luck, my angel," Tahir replied, half in jest half in earnest. He had never given her away to any of the men who came here, but she knew, as he did, that it required no more than a softly spoken word of command and she would obey.

"How about that one over there?" Marina laughed, pointing discreetly toward a fat, middle-aged man in a tight-fitting evening jacket.

Tahir's eyes narrowed pensively. "The chief of police, when he's not here, of course. Does he please you, my love?"

Marina shrugged carelessly. "If you wish him to please me, my love, he pleases me . . ."

Her voice trailed off in an exclamation of surprise at Tahir's fingers tightened suddenly around her wrist. His eyes were very hard. "Can I trust you, Marina?" Tahir said softly. "Yes, I know I can for now—but for how long?"

The blood drained from Marina's heart. "Anytime you need proof, I will supply it," she answered so quietly that even the young man in military uniform who stood chatting with Mirah

behind them and the busy servants could not have caught their words. But Tahir's eyes softened, and for the space of an instant he less resembled the powerful master of Constantinople's most elegant salon than a lovestruck schoolboy.

At that moment she knew that Tahir was her prisoner, and that she was free.



It was long past midnight, but the men in Gerard Ruel's warehouse worked with solemn intensity, their shirts stained with sweat and their brows glistening under the visors of their caps. Smoky lamps hung from brackets on the walls, and their light danced furtively in the yawning space of the huge shed.

Ruel had a gang of almost two dozen men with him, not counting the guards around the warehouse who had been picked for their sharp eyes—and their silence. The men were armed with pistols and steel crowbars. The pistols tucked in their belts were to protect them in the event of a raid or the invasion of armed intruders—always a possibility on the dark, deserted pier. The crowbars served to pry open the cavernous slat-wood crates that filled the warehouse. The men worked in rows of three or four abreast, like reapers in a field. Ruel's place was in the front rank, the most vulnerable to attack. One man followed behind the rest, hammering the lids of the open crates back into place.

"Hey, over here!" The man working the place behind Ruel gave a cry, and the others ran to gather around the crate he had just torn apart.

"*Merde!*" Jean Paul Brilem, a hardened dockhand, swore in an



awestruck voice. "You were right after all, Ruel, a thousand pardons." He touched his cap.

Gerard Ruel clapped him good-naturedly on the back. Jean Paul was the head of his gang, a weathered seaman who had experienced everything the sea had to offer except death—that he had only escaped by miraculous interventions. He knew the harbor of Constantinople like the back of his hand, and even in the dark, he could identify sounds and smells that gave him his bearings as clearly as if it was the broad light of day.

"You are forgiven, my friend." Ruel sank his hand through the straw matting that filled the crate and pulled out a slender, deadly rifle. He held it up triumphantly. It was a German Mauser. Five and a half feet of cold, hard steel gleamed under the lamps. The man stared at it in silence.

"That is the latest type of its class, unless I am mistaken," said Louis Pailleur, who fancied himself something of a munitions expert. Ruel surrendered the weapon to the enthusiast, who examined it with careful reverence.

"Magnificent," Pailleur whispered. "An entire regiment would be helpless against this piece. Very refined," he added. "When you have this in your hand, you can do what you want."

"Yes, well, let us see what else is in our little Christmas package." Ruel pushed his cap to the back of his head. He brushed the layer of straw out of the top of the crate. Besides the German rifles the crate yielded up French Lebel's—almost equal to the German-made guns in length, and equally deadly. The case held fifty rifles in all, bayonets, cases of grape balls, steel-corded bullets and the crippling dum-dum bullets, rounds of shot, encased in cardboard boxes. "Enough ammunition to withstand a short siege," exclaimed Jean Paul Brilem.

Ruel looked at the collection of items and whistled softly. "These bastards mean business," he said. With the back of his hand he wiped his sweating brow. "Well, we mean business too. Let's get on with it."

The men went back to work. The crate of weapons was repacked into a waiting crate, its destination already stenciled on the side of the box. "Paris."

They found six more crates that "needed repacking," as Jean Paul put it, and by the time the light broke in the sky, the Paris-bound goods were ready for their long return journey to France. By noon they would be safely packed into the hold of the

next outbound ship. The *Flora* was bound for the Atlantic the following night.

There was more to be discovered in Ruel's warehouse. Besides the crates of munitions the men were also on the lookout for caches of opium. These were harder to detect, as the packages were by nature small and difficult to find under the masses of objects in the different cases. It took a sharp eye to pick out the heavy oilcloth parcels, but once they were discovered, it was a simple matter to remove them and rearrange the contents of the crate so that it seemed that it had never been tampered with. Even with the painstaking, backbreaking chore of checking as many of the boxes as they could, the men in Ruel's warehouse were able to intercept only a part of the crates. How big that part was of the whole, they could not guess, nor could they tell how much booty—guns and drugs—slipped through their fingers. It was a situation that would have discouraged the most zealous patriot.

A man like Tahir el Bayadim would have laughed at them and called them fools to battle against staggering and unknown odds. Laughed, that is, until he discovered that it was his crates Ruel's men pried open and searched night after night in foggy waterfront warehouses. It gave Ruel a deep satisfaction to reroute the rifles intended for Tahir's private munitions supplies and the warring tribesmen in Turkey. If he sent them back to France, it was partly out of patriotism and partly for the challenge of such an audacious gesture, executed beneath the vigilance of the man who considered his power inviolate in Constantinople. As for the opium clearly intended either for the private market or for the German hospitals, it satisfied what remained of his idealism to know that it would finish instead in the French infirmaries and operating rooms.

Ruel walked stolidly up the hill in the old quarter of the sprawling city, through the early fog that wrapped like lace around the spiraling minarets and the golden dome of the Hagia Sophia. He passed down the fragrant, tree-lined streets without seeing the beauty of the Oriental morning which had stirred so many poets to their finest expression. He would rest for a few hours. He was to have dinner with the French ambassador, and before that he must see the man known as the Belgian. Later he would join Tahir at his salon. As exquisite as were Tahir's

women, he knew that they were but expensive whores, women of voluptuous charm and practiced delights. Dusky, smooth-skinned Oriental beauties, jaded and wealthy European aristocrats who had left behind lives of stilted propriety, innocents from the hills of Italy and Arabia who had nothing to offer men but the dark sparkle of their eyes and the softness of their lips—he used them as others would use a drug. The pleasure he found with them was fleeting, their soft caresses almost painful. In their faces he hoped to see the look of one lost to him forever, a dark girl he had left in a country that was but a memory.



Henri Belquose was alone in his tiny shop. He was known as the Belgian, despite the fact that he had spent most of his life in North Africa, far from his native Ostend. Wiping his fat, gleaming face with a soiled kerchief, he jerked at the string on the ceiling fan, and with a gentle whir the broad wooden blades spun into motion. It was only noon, and he was already exhausted—not so much by the heady heat as from the arduous, difficult work that had occupied him since dawn. He needed money as quickly as it could be garnered. It was not that business was slacking off; indeed he had manufactured and sold more guns and explosives than ever this month. Belquose fashioned unique pistols and bombs to order. They were weapons always needed in the underworld of Constantinople. The new radio had proved a valuable source of income, but even so, he knew this new idea of his was going to be expensive.

Belquose had spent the day here in what masqueraded as a chic store for antique collectors. He tried to recall certain facts that pertained to his real business, which he conducted in the cellar beneath the store. He was writing a list of all the people who had come to him in the past year, what arms he had sold them, and in what quantity. Putting these names and these facts down

in black and white meant going against one of his fundamental business resolutions—namely, never, but never, write anything down. But Henri Belquose was a desperate man.

The Belgian's dilemma was an old but difficult one. He was in love. He, a man long past his early manhood, a man with a long-suffering wife and five children waiting for him in Ostend, a man famous for expertise in weapons, a man who knew the laws of the streets of every city he had lived in—in brief, a man who had no business caring for a girl young enough to be his daughter—was as helplessly infatuated as any schoolboy.

The object of his abject, incessant desire was one of Tahir's women. He had seen her in Tahir's salon, where she entertained the guests with conversation and chatter before she vanished behind the grille with the man who had bought her for the evening. He had noticed her frail girlishness, and wherever he went, whatever he did, Mirah's delicate face would appear unbidden, until he knew that he must have her at all costs.

But he knew Tahir. The Turk had never given up one of his women before, although other love- or lust-smitten men had requested their favorite courtesans. Tahir had politely but firmly declined staggeringly large offers of money. There were no exceptions; when a man insisted, the woman he asked for would suddenly vanish from the luxurious salon, and it would be as if she had never existed. What became of those women was never discovered. A woman of low morals in a city like this was too trifling to be investigated, and Tahir's money lined the pockets of every police official, which put an end to any threat.

But Tahir had never been offered such a gift as the Belgian was contriving. With the Belgian's list at his disposal, Tahir would have his finger on the pulse of the most important contraband traffic in the city. Everyone came to the Belgian for weapons—Tahir himself; foreign gentlemen with pinched, anxious faces; swaggering fools of every description, who harbored grudges; and most important of all, Tahir's own sworn enemies. The Turk would be surprised to see the names of his so-called harmless friends among those who armed themselves out of this shop.

Tahir was not a fool. He would give the girl Mirah to Henri Belquose, and he would give him money besides. With the money Tahir would pay him, Henri Belquose would take the girl and leave Constantinople. They would go to Madrid and live like

the rich, whom Belquose secretly envied. By tomorrow Mirah would be his.

But the peace he needed to work suffered a number of interruptions. During the afternoon, two Englishmen burst into the shop just as the Belgian was beginning to concentrate his memory on the business he conducted from his cellar. They asked to see a rug and several bibelots of undetermined origin, which he labeled "Persian" because he sensed that this would please them. He knew that they had money in their pockets, and time to browse, and his rapacious instincts were too strong to let them slip through his fingers without coaxing as much money as he could from their pockets. So he ordered the boy Hamil to bring coffee, and it was almost three before the two men departed with the bibelots and a rug that had, he told them, been presented to the pasha by his favorite wife. This accounted for the slight irregularity of the weave.

As soon as they left his shop, the Belgian went back to work, not even stopping for his customary meal of cold lamb and rice. Henri Belquose was not much given to tasks that involved pen and paper, and his thick paws, which were so skillful when he worked with the precise, delicate machinery of a gun or adjusted the dials of the radio he had installed in the cellar, were as clumsy as a child's as with laborous concentration he began to write.

By ten o'clock the Belgian had completed his list of "customers" to his satisfaction. He folded the paper neatly several times into a small white square and tucked it into the pocket of his grease-stained vest. He stretched his aching body. The festivities in Tahir's salon did not begin in earnest until after midnight. He still had a little time to relax before he shaved and dressed for the evening.

The Belgian fiddled idly with the knobs of the wireless radio that stood on the worktable that dominated the low-ceilinged cellar. It was his great passion, as well as an important source of income—for information brought a high price in the underworld of Constantinople, especially when news from points as distant as Paris and Berlin and Tangier was for sale. He had built it himself with the same love and skill that went into his peerless weapons. He could both receive and dispatch messages at great distances, and Belquose had spent endless hours adjusting the

knobs on the dials and screening the crackle of static from the airwaves for news.

He sat there now, his fat body hunched over the set, his ears strained for an intelligible sentence. His eyes burned intently into the cumbersome wooden box that housed the apparatus, as though his sight might somehow pick up something that escaped his ears. He glanced furtively at his watch, loath to tear his eyes away from the crystals and the intricate wires for even the space of a second. Soon the wires began to buzz and the static danced on the line. Impatiently the Belgian twisted the dial to the right, and then a hair to the left. The noise lessened, static cleared, and he listened carefully to the low hum of the wires. A frown of concentration creased his sweating forehead.

"Paris . . . Paris . . ." an anonymous voice repeated flatly. "*Ici Le Havre*," another voice replied. The wires cracked and for a maddening moment the Belgian feared he had lost contact. His fat fingers fiddled cautiously with the dial until the voice came through again.

". . . harbor report. *La Belle France*, bound for Marseilles; the *Termonde* to Tangier; HMS *Ductant*, USS *Lafayette*, the *Malines*, the *Consvor*, bound for Naples; the *Corrienne*, the *Jacques Coeur*, the *Moncereau*, for Constantinople . . ." The flat nasal voice continued to list the ships that had left Le Havre that day, and their destinations. The Belgian wondered abstractedly how many other radios were picking up the message. At that moment the door to his cellar grated open and Gerard Ruel, resplendent in evening clothes, stood framed in the low doorway.

"Good evening," Ruel said casually, as though this visit were nothing more than a social call.

The Belgian smiled, or rather, winced up at the tall, powerful man whom he hated and envied for his handsome elegance, his reputation for daring and his success with women. Even the courtesans at Tahir's villa vied for his attention. Even Mirah smiled warmly upon this man.

The Belgian pulled himself into a standing position and looked up at Ruel. His placid round face masked his dislike. "The report you wanted has just come through." With infinite grace his fingers closed around the note Ruel handed to him, and in a flat, methodical tone he recited the information intercepted only a few moments before on his radio.

"Good." Ruel nodded. "Good news. You are invaluable, my friend." The Belgian flinched under the heavy condescension in Ruel's voice and he hated him more than ever. But he smiled deferentially and accepted without a murmur of protest the rest of the money that Ruel held out to him. He was still smiling when Ruel turned on his heel and vanished up the narrow cellar stairs. The door slammed shut behind him, and as the Belgian imagined Ruel sauntering easily down the street to his chauffeured automobile, swinging his cane elegantly from side to side, his smile became malicious.

The idea of the list vanished from his mind, to be replaced by a stunning realization. How interesting that Ruel cared so much for the news about the ships that he would unfailingly pay the exorbitant price Henri Belquose exacted. Interesting, too, that those very ships were so often the victims of unfortunate encounters with pirate vessels and arrived at their distant destinations with only half of their original cargo and perhaps half of their original crew. And how very fascinating that the bedrock of Ruel's reputation rested on the fact that Ruel's own ships so very rarely were attacked.

Suddenly energized into motion by the magnitude of his discovery, Henri Belquose dashed up the stairs, ran through the dark shop, and rushed to his living quarters above. He must dress and get to the villa at once. In less than an hour Tahir would have surrendered Mirah to him—Mirah and any price he asked.





Tahir el Bayadim sat alone in his private wing of the villa which overlooked the dark shining waters of the Bosphorus. The walls were paneled in dark oak, and massive glass-fronted bookcases ran the circumference of the room. No visitor ever dared divert his attention from Tahir long enough to peruse these books at close range, but even a casual glance revealed that the cases contained the important works of modern Europe, volumes of economics and political thought. One wall was entirely devoted to military history and biographies, foremost among them a large collection of volumes devoted to the greatest and most tragic of conquerors, Napoleon Bonaparte.

A writing desk of herculean proportions commanded the space before the tall windows. Somber brocade drapes billowed in the refreshing night breeze that whispered through the open casements. Two large lamps on opposite sides of the desk bathed the room in a golden light, painting the deep armchairs, the plush sofa, and the canvas that dominated the room with burnished highlights. The oil was of an odalisque, a woman of sultry and eternal perfection, taunting, smiling, and aloof. In the bottom right-hand corner, Ingres had signed his name in a spidery hand. The painting hid a steel safe built into the wall—this arrange-

ment in itself a vital clue to the passions of the man who occupied this office. Money, women, and finally power were the central elements of his nature. All else here—the tasteful bibelots, the exquisitely carved statues—was extraneous to the man himself.

Tahir rose from his desk and restlessly crossed the pale sweep of carpet. Everything had gone so well until now. It had been nothing to eliminate any threat to his certain rise in the underworld of Constantinople itself. The control of the city was the key to ruling all of Turkey, and had fallen to him with hardly a struggle. The inexhaustible pools of money which submerged all obstacles beneath a tidal wave of bribery, and his knowledge of the personal shames and secrets of every vital official in the capital, gave him the upper hand. Constantinople was his power base, his inviolate stronghold.

Men of power throughout Europe backed him in Berlin, Zurich—and above all, his invaluable ally in Paris. They knew as well as he the riches in the Mesopotamian desert, they knew the strategic importance of Constantinople and the staggering wealth that passed through her harbor. With these men to back his bid for power, all that remained was to consolidate his position and wait for the proper time to strike.

Tahir had maneuvered himself to the nerve center of an illegal network which extended from the waters of Paris to the heart of India. The authorities politely ignored certain irregularities in the harbor, closing their eyes as Tahir received crates of guns and shells from Europe, and turned their thoughts to his generous gifts of gold as the supplies of raw opium arrived from the East. The drugs were loaded onto ships, and the guns, taken off the same vessels, were loaded onto trucks and horse-drawn carts.

In the Caucasus the mountain tribes waited for the rifles and for his word to overrun the vast estates that ruled the countryside. Along the rugged cliffs of Gallipoli, what remained of the exhausted Turkish army was still poised, embittered by war and ready for leadership. With the renewed sound of gunfire he was confident that half of the battalion commanders would side with him, and that was enough. He was ready to detonate the explosion, but still the barbarian troops in the mountains were unarmed.

But his carefully laid plans were being sabotaged. Boats heading west were occasionally diverted and destroyed, as a natural result of mines and hostilities on the Mediterranean. But in re-

cent months, more than a third of the opium that left Constantinople had never reached Paris, and his contact in the French capital was threatening to procure his merchandise by other means. At the same time, such a staggering quantity of weapons had inexplicably vanished into thin air between the two ports that the growth of his stockpile of weapons had all but ground to a halt.

The unknown enemy had him by the throat and was pulling the garrote tighter and tighter around his neck, until he could scarcely breathe. A cold fury took hold of him. He was fighting for his life, and he knew it. He must find this man who was sapping his lifeblood. He would find the man, and then he would crush him.

With the opening of a door in the outer room, the curtains gusted heavily, warning Tahir of an intrusion. An impassive mask settled over Tahir's face, showing nothing of his concern. Hamuran, the massive Lebanese who had been taken from the dungeons of the sultan and now served as Tahir's bodyguard, filled the doorframe. "A man says he has something to give you." Hamuran's voice was harsh and guttural. "Belquose. *Le belge*." The roughly pronounced French sounded clumsy on Hamuran's tongue.

"Belquose?" Tahir shrugged. Belquose was a worthless scum, a parasite, and Tahir knew that the rotund, sweating little man had become hopelessly enamored of the Turkish girl Mirah. It was easy to anticipate the reason for the Belgian's visit: it would be a waste of time. Belquose had nothing of value to offer him in exchange for Mirah. Soon the necessity for dealing with trivial fools such as Henri Belquose would be over. Then it occurred to him that it might be amusing to sport with the man known in the underworld as the Belgian. "Send Monsieur Belquose to me," he said.

Belquose sat uncertainly at the edge of the chair Tahir indicated and accepted a glass of brandy that was offered. Tahir noticed that his face was already flushed with alcohol.

"Belquose, my old friend, how may I be of service to you?"

The Belgian twisted the stiff collar of his shirt nervously. "I believe I have something which may be of interest to you, M. Tahir," he said in a reedy, quavering voice which sounded strained and foreign to his own ears but which he could not control.

Tahir swung one long leg over the other and studied the toe of his polished boot. "What could you possess that could be of interest to me, Belquose?"

The Belgian dug through the breast pocket that held a small piece of paper. "My work, my skills, if you will permit me to be so immodest," Belquose stammered out in an attempt to match Tahir's calm, "bring me into contact with many men who could be a threat to you. If you knew who comes to me for information, what weapons I sell to whom, then you might gain some advantage. . . . I have a list." His words trailed off into a carefully scored silence. Suddenly confident, the Belgian relaxed and waited for Tahir to snap at the meaningless bait, but he was soon to be disappointed.

"I understand, yes, I understand," Tahir said with ill-concealed impatience. "If I bought this information, if I acquired this list of petty thieves and killers which only you can give me, then I might one day avoid some unforeseeable mishap. That is it, is it not, *Monsieur le Belge*? This is your offer? And now you have only to announce your price, and then our business together will be finished." Tahir smiled, or rather grimaced. The Belgian flinched. "Give me the list, Belquose."

Under Tahir's gaze, Henri Belquose seemed to melt; a fine rivulet of perspiration ran down the back of his neck, and beneath his handsome dark jacket his shirt was soaked.

Despite his fear, the Belgian clung desperately to his plan. "I have brought the first page of the list. There are five pages in all. This one is for sale. I am sure, Monsieur Tahir, that we can come to an agreement of price. As for the rest . . ." He sucked in his breath and pursed his lips, but his courage failed him.

"As for the rest . . . ?" Tahir repeated softly. "The price would involve something different, a trade, an exchange of properties, so to speak?" Tahir finished, infinitely pleased with the flicker of terror across the Belgian's face.

The pathetic attempt almost amused Tahir. He had already decided the fate of Henri Belquose. For, whatever else he was, the Belgian was a traitor—an informer. A man no one could trust. It made no difference that it was Tahir's enemies, or his imagined enemies, that Belquose betrayed. The crime lay in the fact that the little man was capable of treason.

Without a flicker of deliberation Tahir decided that by dawn

the Belgian's weighted body would be at the bottom of the rough current of the Bosphorus. As for Mirah, was she his accomplice? It was possible. In any event, the girl would have to go. The poetic simplicity of disposing of her alongside the Belgian pleased Tahir. The martyred lovers of Constantinople, he thought with a flash of amusement. Tahir suddenly began to enjoy this charade of cat and mouse. He would make that fat little man squirm and sweat a bit before sending him on to other, greater perspectives. "And what if the information you possess is valueless, monsieur?" "Or if your need of money and of this woman . . . Yes indeed, I know why you come here, Belquose, you and your fabricated list of names, your lies—"

"Excellency," the fat man begged, "why should I deceive you? Keep the first page until you have verified it for yourself. I will take no money for it. Not a franc. Not a pound. Not until you tell me with your own lips that you are satisfied that I, Henri Belquose, do not lie."

He was standing now, stabbing at the air with a pudgy index finger, his face livid with the power of his righteousness. "And when you are content that what I tell you is true, we will discuss the rest."

Tahir's hand shot out and stripped the list from the Belgian's fingers. His heavy-lidded eyes flickered over the page of scribbled names. It was as he had expected. Thieves of the lowest rung, opportunists, black marketers, petty contraband entrepreneurs, underworld benchmen and spies who owed their loyalty and their livelihood to masters far more powerful than they. The scum of humanity living craven in their fear and consumed by a futile lust for power. Dogs preying on those even weaker than themselves. And Belquose, ready to sell them for a bag of gold, was no better than the worst of them. No one would weep for this sweating, avaricious pig.

"It is worthless, Belquose." Tahir laughed shortly. He crumpled the paper in his fist and let it fall to the carpet at the Belgian's feet. "You offer me knowledge that I already possess. Do you think my men have been idle?"

The sickening perfume of violence hung between them. Belquose's bloodless lips twisted uncontrollably. He knew he was playing a deadly game. But it was not over—not yet.

Unsteadily he rose from his chair. "If they have not been idle,

then your . . . lackeys have not been as efficient as you pride them on being, Excellency." For the first time in his life, a life he himself would judge in the same cold light as Tahir, Belquose had something to fight for. Blinded by his own overpowering love for Mirah, the Belgian flung all caution to the winds and spoke with the forceful assurance of a man who believes his victory is in his grasp.

"On the sixteenth of August, the Italian freighter *San Marisa* sailed from Marseilles. It disappeared off the coast of Cyprus. Raido contact had been lost." He paused, surprised at his bellowing voice.

"The *San Marisa* carried English cannon. But of course you know that. They were your guns. They were also your guns on December 1, when the French ship *Le Belle d'Acre* was attacked by two unmarked vessels. When the ship limped into Constantinople a week later, half its crew was dead and all of its cargo destroyed. In February a convoy of five ships left Le Havre, escorted by two light cruisers. They never reached Gibraltar. Pirate vessels—"

The litany was choked off as Tahir's hand reached for his neck, strangling the words that poured from Belquose's lips.

"The name, Belquose! Tell me his name!"

Belquose saw the visage of death, a rage so wild and monstrous in Tahir's black face that the Belgian's body spasmed in fear.

"His name. Give me the name of my enemy, you vermin!"

Belquose could not think; the world reeled around him. Mirah's face swam in and out of focus, the saucy swing of her hips, the satiny texture of her breasts. He struggled for breath as Tahir's long fingers closed around his throat, choking him. As a last resort he sputtered helplessly, "Ruel . . . Ruel, the smuggler."

Tahir threw the Belgian aside so violently that he went crashing into the wall. Ruel! One man whom he trusted, the man to whom he had offered a position in his plans of power. Rage boiled through his veins. Ruel! The traitor, the thief. The knife behind the easy smile. Ruel would die—but first he would talk. Tahir needed to hear the arrogant Ruel beg for mercy. It would be easy to trick him into careless confidence, easy to make him believe that Tahir was still his friend, his dupe.

"Tahir," Belquose whimpered, "Tahir, give me the girl. Give me Mirah."

But Tahir was finished with Henri Belquose. With a nod to his Lebanese guard, Tahir strode purposefully from the room.



Marina never served the men who frequented the salon. Her spell over Tahir was strong enough to fan a smoldering rage of jealousy in him at the thought of her arms wrapped in passion about the neck of another man as he buried himself in the hot warmth of her loins. Marina was Tahir's consort, not his creature—perfumed, exquisitely and provocatively dressed, jewels gleaming at her throat and bracelets of sapphires banding the slimness of her arms. The sound of her flirtatious laughter cruelly mocked those who watched her and knew she was unattainable. Desire lived in the eyes of these hard men, for the lines of her rounded body were clear beneath the gossamer fabric of her gown, and the exotic beauty of her violet eyes was mysterious and inviting.

Sidonia watched her with vengeful eyes. What pierced her with a burning pain was the knowledge of Tahir's tenderness and love for Marina. Sidonia's hatred swelled under her heart and pressed against it until she could almost feel it as a physical presence—an insidious creature who squeezed her heart in his fingers and made her want to scream in pain and rage.

The evening was in full swing, the gay chatter of the women and the low hum of the men's voices rising above the clouds of



blue cigarette smoke. Mechanically Sidonia smiled and laughed at the story a Norwegian diplomat was telling at some length. She toyed idly with the coral beads at her throat and smiled automatically when she saw that his eyes wandered to her revealing décolleté. She had no doubt that he would ask for her later—perhaps he would be amusing. But the anticipation of her vengeance could not be stilled by the honeyed words of her admirer. Her mind was consumed with Tahir, and with the bitter rage for the dark beauty who had torn her from her throne. Sidonia would finish her rival, and like a practiced whore she would use the weakness of Tahir to accomplish her ends. Impatiently she waited.

Tahir burst upon the salon with the force of a hate-filled killer, a force that blazed solely from his hooded eyes. In one glance he marked his men, felt the attention of the men focused on him. In a shadowed alcove Marina poised regally beneath the attentions of two cutthroats, and his pride in her broke through even his rage against Ruel. And then he saw him standing alone, half turned away and oblivious. Triumph filled Tahir's heart as he saw that his quarry had come to him. All that remained was to engineer the mechanism of Ruel's death.

The breath of Sidonia's presence at his side was the harbinger of his revenge.

With practiced ease, possessively, she slipped her arm through his. A lacquered nail traced the line of his arm coquettishly. Tahir glanced at her contemptuously, heedless of her purpose.

"How handsome you are tonight," she purred, not noticing his frown at her presumption.

"What is it that you desire?" Tahir asked, brushing aside the compliment. He patted her pale hand absently.

Spurred by her rage at his indifference, Sidonia purred silkily, with calculated evil. "Look at her," she murmured, her eyes racing to where Marina now languorously reclined on a red velvet settee, the two men still standing over her, their eyes feasting on her near-naked form. "She has grown too proud, Tahir, and you have grown blind. Why do you not give her to those who want her? Give her the way you give the others."

"As I give you?" he lashed out at her with a voice that matched hers for softness. "With such ease?"

The words pelted her like stones, but they only quickened her

resolve. She would work the barb of distrust into his mind until the uncertainty she raised would drive him mad.

"She has bewitched you, my master. No longer do you rule here. It is only the softness of her lips and the will of her pliant arms that are sovereign. But you do not know her. She boasts of her power over you," the beautiful blond courtesan hissed.

The ripe warmth of Sidonia's breasts lingered against his body as he listened to her words. His awareness of her nature and the depths of her hatred for Marina was lost to him in the consuming hatred he felt for Ruel. On this ripe ground her accusations sowed the germ of doubt.

"She is loyal, Sidonia. She is mine, and mine alone. Never will I release her from that trust."

She laughed hollowly. "Trust, Tahir! Do you trust her? Then let her prove her submission to you!"

Now he saw Sidonia's tactic, but it was already too late. Ruel had betrayed him—Ruel, the man he trusted above all others. Could he believe in Marina's bond and her love? Had she betrayed him with her hard pride, with knowledge that he held her above all others?

Then he knew how he would trap Ruel, even as Sidonia whispered in husky tones of corrupt love and burning anger, "The dais, Tahir. Take her to the dais. Then you will know her."

His need for vengeance joined with Sidonia's. He knew that it was what he wanted, and he congratulated himself with the perfection of it. He would use Marina to entice Ruel, display her openly before the smuggler and the others, and then with one act he would tighten his hold on both of them.

She was exquisite—Ruel would want her. She was Tahir's woman; to give her to Ruel was a mark of esteem the Frenchman would not dare turn down. The compliment would lull him into a false sense of security. In the arms of Marina even the cautious Ruel would forget everything but the woman in his arms. In the throes of passion he would be off guard—the perfect prey for Tahir's men. Tahir smiled bitterly. Yes, the dais.

He ordered one of his men to bring Marina to him. As he told her of what he wished, he saw the uncomprehending pain in her seductive violet eyes. Her lips trembled in fear, but as he kissed her he felt her body melt in submission to his will, and she murmured her assent to this trial that he offered her.

He chose two of the women to prepare her for the dais, an en-

tainment that had not been performed within the walls of the villa for many weeks. She would be readied by words of flattery and envy by the two women who would serve her by perfuming her body, adorning her with the most precious jewels, offering her the sweet forgetful bliss of opium. Now she was his, and unattainable. When she returned, Marina would be willing to sacrifice herself as he willed. Tahir knew that then she would be more bound to him than ever.

He walked calmly over to where the Frenchman was standing. "Ruel," he greeted him with as much feigned warmth as he could muster, "how unusual to see you among my guests. I hope that . . . everything is to your satisfaction."

Ruel smiled in recognition of Tahir's justifiable pride. "Should it not be, Tahir? Where else are the women so desirable, and so willing? You surprise me. For another man this would be empire enough. Power enough."

Tahir laughed carelessly, hearing the slight slurring of the words, knowing that Ruel had already drunk too much for the clarity of mind he would need. The ripe curves of Marina's flesh would work on his already numbed mind like a drug, and then Ruel would fall into his hands.

"But I am not like other men, and I recognize my equal in you, monsieur," Tahir answered smoothly. "But you are alone. You must avail yourself of one of these who are like fruit waiting to be plucked from a branch for your pleasure. I saw you enter, Ruel, and in your honor I have arranged something special. A mark of respect between princes."

"What is this honor that you will bestow, Tahir? A woman, I suppose?" The voice was jesting, unguarded. But Gerard Ruel knew that the Turk had somehow marked him as an enemy.

"A woman, yes, but a prize that will be yours. I will bring her out for you. She will please you, Ruel, I am sure."

The last quivering notes of a soft violin died as Marina appeared once more; she was dressed as before, but her lips had been more heavily rouged, and the dream state of the opium had overcome her. Her fear and her need for what she was about to do had weakened her limbs, and Tahir as he approached her saw that she had lost her resistance to him. He knew that Sidonia had lied, that Marina's being was given to him. He saw that she longed to corrupt herself in the offering of the dais, and for this he loved her.

Pushing through the crowd, which parted before him, Tahir led Marina to the dais in the center of the room. All eyes were upon them, and the flirtatious laughter and the polite chatter ceased abruptly. The silence seethed with an excited tension. The crowd pressed eagerly forward to watch, and even the gamblers abandoned the card tables and the roulette wheel for this more diverting entertainment.

Fear clutched at Marina's belly as she made her way alone to the top of the white marble platform. How high she stood above the sea of faces that swam beneath her. She had seen other women condemned to stand here naked and exposed like slaves while the men bid for them. The eyes that burned into her were hypnotic, drawing her down, devouring her. Men who had begged Tahir for her and had been refused, men who had longed to possess her, who felt lust for her, all waited eagerly. Even the women waited in breathless suspense, hoping to find solace for their jealousy in her ordeal. Women who, like Sidonia, longed to witness her disgrace.

The excitement of blood sport sweated through the room, and the acrid perfume of terror burned Marina's nostrils. The last shreds of self-possession slipped away from her.

She saw Tahir at the foot of the stairs, his face upturned to her, his eyes urging her to go on, not to disappoint him. Suddenly Marina understood. What happened on the dais was private, a reaffirmation of her submission to Tahir, a pact that only they could understand. The others who thronged to watch were not part of her world, not part of what she must do. Tahir owned her. No matter how many pairs of eyes feasted on the spectacle of her naked flesh, it was still to him, and only to him, that she gave herself. In her pledge to him he had become all men to her. Every man who looked at her now became Tahir, every man who wanted her, who reveled in her naked beauty, was a pale reflection of the man to whom she had pledged her full submission.

A flowing light outlined her as she stood in the silence, a silence that became a heavy sea of desire as proudly she began to disrobe before the hungry eyes. With slow, deliberate care Marina raised her slim arms over her head, showing the swelling curves of her womanliness, releasing herself into the joyous power that suddenly flowed through her.

Unclasping the platinum catch of the necklace that fell into the valley of her breasts, she let it drop to the floor. The clatter of

the stones cut the silence and shocked the men like a prod. A rumble of surging fascination shook the salon as they watched, hypnotized by this sight. Lost in the rich spell of her own overpowering sensuality, Marina writhed in the smoky air, her body undulating languidly, fluidly. The hands that were like the hands of a lover exposing her moved over the rich silks, and her head was thrown back with an ever-increasing passion. With her eyes half-closed beneath the gauzy veil, she slipped the silver tissue frock from her shoulders, and trembled as it slithered by its own delicate weight over the roundness of her hips.

She wore nothing beneath the dress but a light corset and her silk stockings. With tantalizing, deliberate care she undid the stays of the corset, letting it drop beside the dress. She did not hear the gasps that rose from the assemblage when she exposed her breasts and they saw small gold rings that marked her as Tahir's woman.

From somewhere came the plaintive, haunting sounds of a lute. In a private ecstasy, her shame behind her, Marina pulsed to the sound of the instrument. Hoarse shouts called out bids for her from the darkness. The envy of the women and the raging lust of the men that she stirred with the dance flowed over her in a wave of electric heat. Her arms reached upward as her back arched, and the long rich fall of hair furrowed in a river of dark light between her naked shoulders. Her nipples hardened, and beneath the eyes of the watching men the succulent smoothness of her flanks shone with a gleam of sweat. A piercing cry of release was torn from her parted lips, shattering through the storm of unrest in the salon.

Still the cries were lifted, each man trying to outbid the other. A fight broke out, and a knife glittered in the shadows. Only the presence of Tahir prevented them from surging forward to the dais to take her.

Gerard Ruel moved through them, knowing that Tahir watched his every move, and not caring. His being was filled with the woman before him. Agony and desire conflicted within him, but he knew that he must have her. He sensed rather than saw Tahir deploy his men to cut his retreat, but that did not matter. The shouted curses of the others did not matter. Gerard Ruel strode toward the dais to claim the woman who had always been his.

With a swoop he covered her naked beauty with the fragile cloth at her feet. She rebelled against his touch, and her eyes stared sightlessly into his. Effortlessly he lifted her into his arms, kicking aside the men who reached to stop him, and together at last they fled from the salon.



"Whore!"

Gerard Ruel's voice lashed out at her hoarsely as he threw her roughly into a small dark room. The iron bolt snapped into place with the sharp sound of a rifle shot. The meager light of a single candle fought against the darkness, but the stranger stood in shadows, towering over her. Like a rampaging animal he had taken her, sweeping her off into the dark, slinging her over his shoulder, and bursting past the guards of Tahir's villa, heedless of the danger to her. His automobile careened past the door guards and the gate sentries in a hail of bullets. A brutal and stupidly brave abduction, but he would pay for it.

"Tahir will kill you for this," she choked in outraged anger. "The moment you touched me, your life was forfeited."

His grating laugh chilled her. "Whore!" he repeated. "Not his woman, his whore. If he ever finds you, it will not be alive."

"Tahir el Bayadim will find me," Marina lashed back. "And when he does, it will go hard for you. What do you want? Money?"

She stripped the gleaming bracelet of sapphires from her arm and tossed it at him. The band of precious jewels clattered on the floor by the stranger's feet. The man made no move toward it.

"There, take your ransom, you foul animal. Count yourself lucky if you escape before they find you."

"Do you dare, Marina," the stranger mocked, "to bribe an agent of the Okhrana?"

The man stepped out of the shadows, and the dancing light lit his chiseled features.

"Sergei!" Marina gasped.

A smile of triumph cut across his face like a scimitar. "At your service, Mademoiselle Lebedev," he said very softly.

Marina's heart fluttered dizzily under the shawl which she clasped to her with shaking hands. She was paralyzed by the dark fury on his face, the steely glint in his eyes, which were narrowed to pinpoints of evil light. The rush of her remembered love fled, and she backed away from him, shivering beneath the silk shawl in wide-eyed silence.

"I prayed once that I would find you alive, Marina," he rasped. "I knew that with your strength you would survive. I knew—I thought I knew—that no matter what you faced, no matter what terrible choices this war offered to you, you would always be beautiful to me. But this . . ." He laughed harshly, and her heart tore in pain. She felt the talons of his loathing grip on her soul. "Now that I have found you, Marina Lebedev, and seen for myself what you are, I would rather have seen you dead! Look what you have become. A prize whore, offered like an animal at an auction. How many times had he sold you, Marina?" he spat with hoarse anger. "How many men bought you at Tahir's whim, my love? My love! My . . . my harlot, my strumpet, my beloved, wanton slut!"

The blow of her hand cracked full force on his cheek, and before she could move, he struck her with all the strength of his unleashed fury.

"They were right, Marina. The women of St. Petersburg, for all their blindness—they saw you as you are. Their only mistake was that they misjudged the scope of your brazenness. You would give yourself without a qualm to any man who offered you luxury and power—to a man like Viktor, and then to Tahir. Does it make you proud, to be owned by one of the most ignoble creatures spewed out by this war? Marina, the jewel of the harem! Yes, my darling love, I heard men describe you. I should have guessed that I would finally find you in such a place!"

"No!" You speak of choices. Yes, I had a choice. Death! To



die sewn in a case at the bottom of the Bosphorus. Perhaps that would have suited you better, you hypocrite! I should have remembered, but I was tired of death! Tired of the smell of it, tired of the screams of the dying in Salonika's death wards."

She was unable to stop the words that poured like venom from her lips.

"I may be a whore, Sergei, but there is worse. What have you become? An agent of the Okhrana? A bloodhound set on my tracks? I knew they would catch up with me sooner or later—it was only a matter of time. Your master will be pleased with you, won't he? He'll give you a star to wear, decorations, honors—"

Sergei interrupted her with a harsh laugh. "You overrate your importance, my dear. Do you really imagine that with a war and a revolution on its hands, Russia's secret police have nothing better to do than chase after ill-tempered libertines? It is your beloved Tahir and his accomplice in Paris that Voroshilov is after. Did you know that between them they sell to the enemy guns meant for the Allies? And that they reroute to the Central Powers the morphine meant for Allied hospitals?"

He seemed to control himself, to restrain his anger, and his voice deepened. "Voroshilov knew that I had harbored you. We made a bargain. He would call off his hounds if I would work for him here and destroy the weapons or divert them to Russia. A fine bargain I struck, to save your precious skin, when all the while you were Tahir's willing accomplice."

"You accuse me, but you lie, and you know it." Marina's eyes blazed darkly. "I am not a child anymore, Sergei, a young innocent you can frighten into submission. I am a woman now, and I can bring you to your knees."

Head held high, proud and defiant, Marina raised her slim, banded arms over her head. She plucked the jeweled combs from her hair, and the dark curls tumbled free. The silk shawl whispered to the floor and settled in a cloud at her naked feet. Marina tossed her hair back over her bare shoulders. The fullness of her breasts stirred gently against her narrow rib cage. The proud arrogance of beauty was stamped in every line of her body, from the curve of her high-arched feet to the sinuous sleekness of her thighs and buttocks. Sergei's eyes burned over her naked skin as she taunted him with the full power of the glory of her womanliness. In her innocence, she had been beautiful. In the power of her sensual insubordination, she was dazzling.

His eyes were caught by the small gold rings that glinted dully from her breasts. "So he marked you as his bondswoman," Sergei drawled. "Or did you offer?"

He had hit closer to the mark than he knew. The temptation to lunge at him, to rake her nails across his face until she drew blood, was almost impossible to suppress. But in her time in Tahir's house Marina had learned the power of control. Her eyes never leaving his, she advanced closer and closer to him. With languid grace she reached up and curled her arms around his neck. She lifted her lips to his, teasing his mouth in a soft, practiced kiss. She eased her naked thighs between his legs, riding her body higher and higher, arousing him as she had been taught to arouse the men in Tahir's salon, daring him to be indifferent to her.

He felt the heat of her skin through the fine wool of his evening jacket and the soft coolness of his shirt. Her fingers threaded through the dark locks at the back of his neck, and she moaned softly into his mouth, and her hand traveled down the length of his body, as boldly she caressed his hard maleness.

"I am a whore, Sergei. Tahir's whore. Are you afraid, Sergei? Afraid to take me like the whore I am? Afraid of Tahir's woman?"

With a cry of rage he picked her up and flung her onto the low bed. In an instant he ripped his shirt open, peeled off his clothes, and he was looming above her, naked, his face a hard mask of fury.

"No," she moaned helplessly, but deaf to her pleas, Sergei pried her thighs roughly apart, forced her open, and plunged into her body with all the brutal strength of his anger. Now for the first time she knew what it meant to be treated as a whore.

Sergei plunged relentlessly into her, riding her without mercy, desecrating her body even as she braced herself against the onslaught of his sacrilege.

"Is this how it was with Tahir?" he lashed venomously. "How many men, Marina? How many has it been? One hundred? Two hundred? How many since the last time we met, my delicate, fragile little Marina? How many, my love?"

Again and again he buried himself in her with violent fervor, his voice silky, vengeful, taunting, as he forced her. She writhed in silent agony and bit her lip to keep from screaming. A small

drop of dark red blood pearled at the corner of her mouth and coursed over her pale cheek.

Suddenly his passion gathered into a controlled, deliberate motion, and his body arched and plunged to a soft rhythm. A tremor shook Marina. He teased his fingers over her, flicking lightly at the rings and tracing the furrow between her breasts. She swayed and pitched slowly under him, and of their own volition her arms slipped around him, drawing him nearer. The hatred fled from her eyes. They were limpid and deep, her mouth moist, her lips parted.

"Like this?" Sergei whispered vengefully above her. "Like this?"

But Marina hardly heard him. Tongues of fire licked through her loins, and her hot anger melted into passion. She undulated helplessly under him, responsive to every motion, beyond pride, beyond shame, her body vassal to his will. She was wrenched into a whirling vortex of darkness and exploding light, lost in the depth of a new passion.

She saw the hard slate of his eyes burning into her, and she felt him move with a raging passion into the warmth of her surrender. She was caught in the maelstrom of her own desire, descending deeper and deeper into the whirlwind of release. She heard her voice coming from far away, calling his name over and over, with a tenderness that she had forgotten.

Hot tears stung her eyes as all the love she had hidden surged to the surface. She opened to him, her legs wrapped about him in her ecstasy. His hand grazed the shuddering smoothness of her flanks; she felt him move within her, driven by his own desire.

"Yours, Sergei," she moaned helplessly under his mouth. "Yours."

"Marina," he whispered, "Marina, my love."



In the heat of their renewed embrace, the sore cold deserts of the past receded into nothingness. In the refuge of Sergei Rogozhin's arms, Marina discovered at last the full strength of her desire, the immutable strength of the pact between them, which time could not break, and the destiny that bound her to him.

But beyond the whitewashed walls of their paradise, in the valleys and avenues of the city, Tahir's men lurked attentively. Discreetly dressed, fedoras slouched over vigilant eyes, hands sunk into the pockets of their overcoats, they waited implacably in every corner of the city.

Tahir's orders were clear. "I want him alive, and no harm to come to the girl," he barked, his coal-black eyes glittering feverishly. The intricate network of his empire weakened daily as he neglected it in the hunt for Gerard Ruel. He wanted Ruel caught. He wanted Ruel humiliated. He wanted Ruel broken. And he wanted Marina back.

But a week passed, and then a second, without any sign of the fugitive. Tahir's nerves were overwrought, and irremedial fissures began to undermine the icy calm of his confidence. He became pale, haggard, the skin stretched tightly over his temples, deep lines etched around his mouth. He no longer ate, he no longer

slept, he found solace in nothing but his plans for Ruel. More and more men were ordered to the search.

His quarry was still in Constantinople. Tahir was certain of it. Ruel was far too cagey to attempt a desperate march out of Turkey through the high plains to the east. He knew that Tahir's men and the network of underworld informers who were guarding every road would not fail to find him if he attempted such a foolish move. And the woman would be too easily recognized. With an instinct that had never failed him, Tahir el Bayadim knew Ruel would not leave Marina behind.

The escape would have to be by sea. Ruel knew how difficult the harbor was to watch, with its immense stretch of waterfront that led from the piers of Stamboul to the coastal plains over which loomed the dark towers of the Yedi Kule. And Ruel knew the harbor as a hawk knows the skies.

"I want every vessel searched," Tahir ordered. "Every ship, the smallest caique, warship, freighter, pleasure schooner."

The fears of the Turk were well-founded. Even in the abandonment of the passion which inflamed his days and nights with Marina, Sergei Rogozhin had not been idle in his campaign against Tahir. The urgency of the mission which Voroshilov had entrusted to him became stronger: he must finish his work in Constantinople before he could leave, even as Russia herself was being destroyed by civil strife from within.

"Don't leave me," Marina pleaded the first time she saw Sergei pull on the rough workman's overalls and the tattered shirt. Her eyes were dark with fear for him. "Let him have the guns. We have found each other, and that is enough. I do not want to think of guns and killing anymore!"

"I will finish what I came here to do, Marina," Sergei said with a harsh roughness in his voice that chilled her. "Tahir is unimportant. He is only a small-time underworld prince with dreams of grandeur. But he is controlled by one far greater, by a man named Rovno, who sends Tahir orders from Paris. Rovno is a madman who would betray the world with his schemes of power. It's Rovno's guns and Rovno's lust for gold that are behind this awful war. I won't let him win."

"Voroshilov sent you, for Russia," Marina pleaded. "The Russia we knew is fallen now, and for all you know, Voroshilov is dead, killed by the Bolshevik Cheka. Sergei, there is only our love now. Don't leave me."

"Does our love make us forget the suffering we have seen, Marina?" he asked tenderly folding her in his arms. "Can you forget what the war is? Can you forget that the threat of it still lives in the world for as long as men like Tahir and Rovno are in power? Sleep, my darling. I will be beside you when you awake."

Sergei stealthily slipped through the back streets of Constantinople, skillfully ducking around the web of Tahir's armed underlings. Under different circumstances, it would have amused Sergei to frighten Tahir by cracking the skulls of a few of his thugs and leaving them on the Turk's doorstep as grim warnings, but Sergei's plan required too much energy to waste his efforts on such tactics.

What he had to accomplish was simple—to destroy as many of Tahir's secret arms caches as he could find, to blow the weapons sky-high under the Turk's very nose. Without his mountains of carbines and Mausers, Tahir el Bayadim was nothing. Each night Sergei sent another piece of Tahir's stronghold blasting into the air. A devastating explosion had no sooner reduced the Tower of Galata to powdered rubble than a new bomb rumbled in the bowels of the Yeralti Cami and a fire raged through the locked storehouse by the Gate of Kaltros.

Tahir's men were at a loss for explanations, and not all their master's threats could unveil any hint of complicity or bribery. In vain Tahir threatened and cursed. The invisible Ruel was everywhere in the city, darting in and out of the heavily guarded posts unseen, like a malicious spirit. Tahir's henchmen whispered that this Ruel had special powers, and their courage flagged despite their vigilance. Every night saw a new blaze break out in the city—Gerard Ruel was moving closer and closer to the heart of Tahir's secret empire—the Yedi Kule.

In the dusk of a March evening Sergei held Marina's passionate clinging body and forced himself to tell her that the idyll of the weeks that they had spent here alone was over. They must venture forth out of the safety of their hideaway, without knowing whether it was to face the guns of Tahir's henchmen or to break free of the net that hourly tightened about them. For an instant Sergei doubted her strength, feared that her courage would fail her in the last desperate hour. Then he knew that his fears were groundless. At this moment of perilous danger he

knew why he loved her—that his first glimpse of her had revealed the hard diamond of her fire and her courage, that they were destined to face the world side by side, just as they were destined to find each other here in a hell of corrupt power and omnipresent danger.

Sergei unwrapped the bundle of clothes he had brought for Marina to wear, and tossed them carelessly on the bed—seaman's rags, a disguise that was all the armor he could give her to protect her from Tahir. Poor clothes for a lady reared to silks and foaming laces, but she would need nothing more, except luck.

"Put them on, Marina, we leave tonight. A ship is waiting for us near the Korakoy Bridge. We must be on it. We will dock in Marseilles in two days, three at the most if there is German activity in the Mediterranean. And then Paris, my love."

"Paris," Marina echoed. No longer did the name evoke a city of elegance and grace, but it brought to her mind the crack of rifle fire and the cries of dying men, sounds that she never wanted to hear again. Her heart quailed. "The war, Sergei . . ."

He smiled with tender compassion and a hint of amusement. "Marina, listen to me, the war will end soon. The Americans have joined, and the Germans are exhausted. It's only a matter of months. But even now Paris itself is safe, and for the rest, France is my country even more than was Russia. It is my mother's country, and it will be yours. I have land there, a farm in Normandy, and an estate in Passy outside the capital."

Marina stared at him wide-eyed. "Two days, Sergei!" she cried joyfully, flinging her arms around his neck. "Two days, and we will be free!"

Sergei laughed with her, and whirled her high in his arms. "I have planned a spectacular celebration for our leave-taking, my darling," he said.

"What?" Suddenly the laughter died in Marina's eyes.

"Don't worry, my brave soldier," Sergei laughed. "There will be no confrontation, I promise you, no more hand-to-hand battles. At least, if we are lucky. It is something more in the line of a fireworks display that I have planned. As we stand safely on our ship watching Constantinople fade into the distance, the Yedi Kule will explode into a thousand fragments and light our way to Paris."

"The Yedi Kule? What are you talking about, Sergei?" Marina exclaimed.

"Tahir has taken over the fortress of the Yedi Kule as his key warehouse. It's perfect for him, near the harbor, with walls seventy feet high, as thick as my arm is long. The famous castle of seven towers! In a few hours the fortress will be a mound of rubble, and the inscriptions that the prisoners of centuries have left in the walls will be buried in the dust, along with Tahir's painstakingly collected arsenal of guns and cannon. Everything is prepared. My old friend Henri Belquose supplied me with the necessary tools, as well as the detonators and vials of nitroglycerin."

Sergei's eyes lit with the anticipation of his triumph and the impending destruction of the ancient Byzantine fortress, and Marina saw that she could not dissuade him.

"The two highest towers are the Tower of Inscriptions and the South Tower," Sergei explained, pacing the tiny room impatiently. "They face the sea, and between them there is a sentry walk. The wall that connects them is twenty feet thick, and Tahir is blindly confident that nothing could destroy this battlement. He also thinks that it would be impossible to escape the eyes of his men who patrol it day and night. Little does he suspect that for weeks I have been one of them, and three of his trusted sentries are in league with me. The stone walls are riddled with our bombs, and all the detonators are timed to explode at the same hour that our ship sails. It will be a fitting send-off, my love—a farewell fit for a sultan!"





Midnight. A howling wind and a driving downpour whipped the dark and deserted waterfront streets of the old Galata quarter. The raw, cold rain beat in silvery, slanted sheets against the roughly boarded hotels and the locked warehouses dotting the open stretch of wharves between the crowded city and the ship that was their escape. Wet tarpaulin glistened over heaps of stacked cargo crates, the edges flapping as the wind plucked them from the hastily tied cords. Deserted trucks, also half-hidden by canvas, sat huddled in the dark shadows of the low buildings.

The stillness of the empty, barren alleyways seemed a sign of danger, not of luck. Every sound and movement made Marina start as she followed Sergei to the rendezvous on the docks. Taut hawsers creaked and moaned in the night as the massive vessels towering above them lurched back and forth in the dark waters, straining at the mooring lines. The salty marine air was pungent with the heady, acrid smell of tar and oil and the sickly sweet scent of the tide of foul refuse washing against the creaking pilings.

"There it is," Sergei said at last, shouting against the howling gale.

The sheer gray hulk of the freighter that would carry them to

safety loomed against the clouded night sky. Marina pushed back her streaming hair and blinked away the cold rain. Ripples of jagged lightning lit the heavens, and in the flash of light she saw the distant outlines of the crewmen running back and forth on the high deck. A wooden ramp climbed at a precipitous angle to the ship from the pier, and the steel rails along its side glistened like silver in the night. Other men darted about near the water's edge, already freeing the ship from her moorings.

"See how high she rides," Sergei said, drawing Marina deeper into the safety of the shadows. "Her hold is empty, and while the lightness may give us some trouble in a rough sea, it will add speed. The few extra knots may be needed."

Another bolt of lightning ripped through the night, and the scarred side of the freighter was thrown into relief, and high on its bow Marina read the name *St. Helena*.

Ahead of them ran two towering walls of crates, which protected them now like the long tunnel of a cave. It ended short of the massive ship, and it was this last leg of the journey that would be more perilous than all that had gone before. The open pier that lay between the cavernous crates and the ship was barren and exposed. On this final stretch, brilliant lights illuminated the spattering rain and the gusting mists; the gleaming planks of the pier itself shimmered with the dangerous brilliance of an arena.

Sergei cursed silently as he studied the treacherous ground ahead. He knew only too well that there was no reason for the lights—they signaled danger. Somehow Tahir must have learned of their plans, of the ship they would take. Or was each pier now lit like this, so that Tahir's enemies would be seen no matter from where they tried to escape? Whatever the reason, that hundred yards of pier was as lethal as a minefield.

They embraced in a lingering kiss that held triumph and hope, and was all the more tender for the bittersweet knowledge that death confronted them only a few feet away.

"Be strong, Marina," Sergei whispered. "Don't look back, don't stop, even if there is gunfire. All that matters is to reach the ramp. The crew can be trusted—the ones on the ship, not those below—"

His words were cut off by the low throbbing of the powerful engines, which roared to life, and the long, moaning blast of the

ship's horn, which echoed through the pelting rain. It was their signal.

"Run!" Sergei shouted. He pushed Marina ahead of him and raced after her into the light.

Pain burned Marina's lungs as she forced herself to run. Her limbs were as heavy and lifeless as lead. Each step seemed a frozen agony, her body unresponsive to her need, the safety of the *St. Helena* receding rather than coming closer. She felt Sergei behind her, pushing her ahead of him, urging her to run faster, yet each step took her dangerously far away from the mounds of shelter of the crates.

Suddenly the glaring headlamps of trucks signaled their discovery. The ship's engines droned over the screech of tires on the wet planking.

"Don't stop!" Sergei shouted, even as he turned and drew a revolver. "Don't stop even if they shoot."

Like a well-drilled platoon, the trucks descended upon them in converging lines, moving to cut off their flight. The wooden dock echoed with the sounds of booted feet behind them, and out of the corner of her eye Marina glimpsed one of the ship's crew raising his gun to fire. Then the night was torn with the staccato chorus of rifle fire, the brutal, violent rain of steel. The bullets ripped into the pier before them, splintering the wood, as the trucks screeched to a halt at the angrily shouted orders of Tahir el Bayadim.

Sergei turned on his heel and fired on the lead truck. His bullet found its mark, and the soldier poised on the running board clutched his stomach and fell. Marina turned and saw that the trucks had separated her from Sergei. He was surrounded by Tahir's men.

"Sergei!" she screamed.

"The ship, Marina, the ship!" Sergei shouted, and waved her forward with one hand, even as with the other he sighted his enemy.

"No!" Marina cried again. She began to run toward him, but there were men behind her, and she felt their rough hands around her. Someone swept her into his arms and held her fast. They rushed up the steep ramp of the *St. Helena* just as the ship began to pull away.

Sergei's gun was nearly empty. There was one bullet left in his gun, and that bullet Sergei was saving for Tahir himself. Tahir

stepped from his truck into the circle of light. A sneering smile of triumph played across the lips of the bearded Turk. "So, Ruel, you have come to the end of your rope."

"Not quite, Tahir," Sergei replied coolly. The Turk never saw the gun flash in Sergei's hand, but the bullet caught him under the ribs. But his rage anesthetized him, and not until he felt the warm blood soaking his shirt did he know that he had been hit. Supported by his bodyguard, Tahir watched coldly as his men descended upon Ruel and pummeled him with their fists, until the Frenchman was unconscious.

"Take him," Tahir rasped. "Take him to the Yedi Kule. We have business to discuss."

Marina clung to the rail, fighting the tears that blinded her eyes, and yet forcing herself to look at the scene below, "Sergei, Sergei . . ." she cried hoarsely, as the distance between them started to widen. The wrenching pain in her heart that she was taken from his life was like death to her. Helplessly the French sailors holding her tried to console her, but no longer did human words and human hands hold any solace.

She rose and ran from the strangers around her, feeling the surge of the ship beneath her feet, wanting only to escape into the final darkness that lay beyond the railing of the ship. The sailors followed her, and the first one of them caught her as she collapsed against the iron railing, holding her even as she twisted and fought against him with the last of her strength.

"Non, non!" he said, frustrated by the uselessness of his words. "*Il faut vivre. Il faut vivre.*" And he heard her shaking sobs that were a denial of his command.

To live, she thought despairingly. Was that all? Could she go on now, her love turned to ashes, her life a bleak wilderness of despair? A part of her had died, a joy that would never return. Her eyes searched the misted darkness of the shores of Constantinople, and their emptiness seemed a vision of the life that lay ahead.

A low rumble quaked through the stillness, rocking the ship, and Marina raised her eyes to the sight of a pearly white mass sitting above her on the cliffs. The Yedi Kule! She heard the sounds of the explosions ripping through the ancient fortress even before the night was scarred by the rockets of flame and billowing smoke that erupted into the heavens. Within the granite walls of the Yedi Kule, Sergei's well-laid charges ignited in a

frightening percussion, until at last the flames reached the central storehouse. The last explosion turned the Yedi Kule thundering into a terrifying tower of orange flame.

The ghastly light blurred into a vision of hell. Hot tears stung Marina's eyes, and Sergei's name fell like a litany from her trembling lips. The *St. Helena* surged forward, toward the unknown, carrying her forever from the waters of the Golden Horn.



A tall, fair woman parted tattered velvet drapes and looked down upon the cold night. Her face was serene, the wide forehead calm, the eyes empty of the fear that was second nature to so many in this war-torn capital. In the official register of the dilapidated hotel, she was listed as Comrade Berenskaya—she had come accompanied by a smartly dressed commissar who insisted that she be given a room to herself, regardless of the overcrowded conditions at the hotel. And even in this capital of brotherly equality, the people's rules bent for the regal young woman. In the space of a few short minutes a room had been commandeered for her use.

Beyond Darya Ivanovna's window the streets of Lenin's Petrograd were dark and silent beneath a heavy blanket of snow. A cold moon illuminated deserted avenues and the blank, sightless faces of houses whose windows were sealed shut with boards, rags, and salvaged bits of cardboard against the bitter cold. Gone were the warm lights and the ringing sleigh bells of the czar's St. Petersburg. The new city, spawned by the conquering Bolsheviks out of the merry, libertine capital, lay still, exhausted and humbled, her strength sapped by the long years of war and civil strife. A new age of equality was at last at hand—equal privation,

equal fear, equal suffering for all. Scions of princes and sons of paupers scavenged for firewood and lumps of coal with the same desperate ferocity. Half-starved, shivering in their thin coats and musty, ragged woolens, they ducked between the columns of the well-fed, well-dressed soldiers. In the warmth of the barracks and the government houses, Lenin's earthly paradise had come at last; beyond these sprawled the wasted tracts of a fallen empire.

Darya watched a man cross the icy square in front of the hotel. He walked slowly, his shoulders hunched against the cold, wrapped in a long, tattered overcoat that hung almost to his ankles. A scarf was twisted around his neck and covered the lower half of his face; his cap was pulled low on his head, the visor shielding his eyes so that even at close range it would have been impossible to distinguish him from the hundreds of nameless, faceless men in this desperate city. Yet her heart swelled with hope as the man made his way across the square and drew nearer to the low-flickering lamppost in front of the hotel. She held her breath and willed him not to stop. See how he walks toward me . . . now he is coming nearer . . . advancing closer and closer. With fierce concentration Darya Berenskaya willed him to look up.

But deaf to her prayers, the man stopped, hesitated, and turned into a dark, narrow street that opened into the square at the far side of the hotel. In a minute he had vanished. With a cry of disappointed rage, she let the curtain fall over the desolate whiteness.

Her eyes flickered over the large bare room—the antechamber of a spacious suite in more opulent times. A soiled satin quilt and a stained counterpane covered the bed. Besides the ghost of a once-beautiful carpet, the room contained a dark, brooding wooden armoire, a dresser, and a small armchair covered with fraying silk. Dark wet patches on the wallpaper showed where the cold sweated through ill-repaired walls.

Darya shuddered, half with cold, half with disgust. To think that Russia should have come to this—to think that she, Darya Ivanovna, was reduced to such squalor.

A sharp tap made her start. Darya pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders and cracked the high oak door open onto the dark, drafty passageway. It was the concierge, a shriveled scrawny hag whose clothes were spotted with grease. The woman's hair straggled in oily strands from beneath her kerchief.

"Your kerosene ration for tonight," she whined, holding out a greasy vial.

Suppressing a shudder of repulsion, Darya accepted the unlovely offering. The woman's servile manner disgusted her—that and her sharp, inquisitive eyes that darted through the open door onto Darya and the room beyond. Time and time again the old woman scuttled up the stairs on the slightest pretext, hoping to learn something about the mysterious young woman she and the other boarders stalked with furtive, curious eyes. Who was she? Where did she come from? Why was she alone of all guests entitled to the privilege of a room to herself? Others shared cramped quarters and even made do with the sofas and armchairs in the salons downstairs. The old woman climbed the long flight of stairs to Comrade Berenskaya's room determined to come back with some tidbit of information to share with the others and shed some light on the mystery. But without fail, she came away disappointed. Politely but firmly Darya Ivanovna grated the door shut in her face, leaving her angry and piqued but no wiser than before.

Tonight the concierge met with no more success than usual. "Thank you," was all that Darya murmured, and the door snapped closed.

Darya leaned back against the heavy door, waiting for the old woman to leave. She set the oil down on her dresser. Everything here filled her with revulsion—she hated the decadent splendor of this room, the squalid despair of Petrograd and the atmosphere of resignation that hung like a cloud over Russia; she hated the sight of the soldiers strutting puff-chested through the streets, well-fed ruffians amidst crowds of famished civilians, grinding their heels in the hollow-eyed faces of their betters. She hated the filthy swine! They stared at her in the streets, devouring her with their eyes as she passed. They would have been shot point-blank for such impudence before the revolution. But in Lenin's Russia, authorities winked when the sons of serfs revenged their forefathers by despoiling the daughters of their usurped masters. Even the broad avenues were a nightmare of danger—and it was foolish for desperate women to venture out alone.

This shabby room was her refuge and her prison. Had he forgotten the day he sent her here to seduce and corrupt Anton Voroshilov? Had he guessed the hell that Russia would become in the space of a few short months? Or did he even care into



what an inferno of risk and hardship he had plunged her, his beloved, trusted mistress?

Ludovic Rovno, the "merchant of death," the mystery man of Europe, his enemies called him. The invisible hand behind insurgent uprisings, the shadowy presence behind toppled thrones and rebel armies. Risen from the ranks of petty thieves and contrabandeurs on his native Greece to knighthood and public honor in Europe, Rovno had factories that sprawled from the English countryside to the broad plains of the Balkans. His web of influence stretched into the salons and back doors of every political stronghold in Europe and the Orient.

Because he cared for her, loved her, taught her the magic of power and passion, she had loved him with unflinching, single-minded ardor. For Rovno she had returned to Russia to break Voroshilov. His consort, Ludovic Rovno called her. The anger in Darya's breast peaked to a crescendo of hot rage. In her cruel isolation here in Petrograd, the warmth of his passion could not help her, not all the passes of safe conduct nor the meager privileges he wangled from Paris console her for the loss of his arms around her, his deep, tender passion as he stroked her pliant flesh and buried the strength of his desire in her smooth thighs. Yes, he still held her, his love bound her to him as irrevocably as she was bound to the morphine he had taught her to use.

A cry of rage escaped Darya as she ripped open the armoire and the drawers of the dresser. She pulled her deep trunks out from under the bed and flung them open. Dainty silk underclothes, chemises, corsets, garters, stockings—pearly pink, ecru, edged with priceless lace. Pearls, cold diamonds, and twinkling jewels fell pell-mell in a heap amidst the delicate frocks and lingerie. A king's ransom. Her dowry provided with unstinting generosity by Ludovic Rovno in the carefully plotted assault on Anton Voroshilov. A man whose secrets could only be bought with the soft, scented flesh of his own mistress. And Rovno had been willing to pay this price in this monstrous exchange. No—she had been willing. A docile pawn in the deadly game between Rovno and his staunchest enemy, the incorruptible Okhrana chief. The game was over now. Rovno had won. Darya dared not reckon what she had lost.

Yes, Rovno must have known from the start how this would end. The seeds of this revolution had been sown by impassioned idealists, but without his guns, his cannon, what good were the

words of Marx and Lenin? Without his bullet belts in bandoliers around their chests, Lenin's army of rough peasants was nothing more than an impotent uprising, a faction of discontented hotheads, powerless against the might of the czar's imperial armies. With the weapons from Rovno's obliging factories in their hands, the old order had crumbled. The czar was in prison and his ministers, his court, his police, all fled before the vengeful strength of the armed rabble. The dreaded Okhrana itself dissolved, its prisons cracked open, its victims freed. And Lenin's new police, the Cheka, dedicated to the relentless manhunt of its predecessors. They were labeled criminals against the state. A price had been placed on the head of Anton Voroshilov.

By tomorrow she would be aboard a Dutch freighter. Her name was already listed among the passengers—another tribute to the majesty of Rovno's influence in a city where others waited for months for berths on an outbound vessel. Spent by the rush of her anger, Darya sat heavily upon the bed. She pressed her hands to her temples in an effort to stay the sudden weariness that assailed her, the dizziness that caused the room to swirl around her in a disjointed ballet of light and shadow.

By now her mouth was dry and she felt an ominous throbbing at her temple. She put her hand to her breast, as if to stay the ache that suddenly throbbed under her creamy skin. She moaned through half-open lips as waves of pain shocked through her. Her hand fumbled beneath the tattered counterpane, and she shuddered as her fingers grazed the cool roughness of the sheets.

She pulled a small blue leather case free, and trembling now, she pried it open. The flickering kerosene lamp picked out the glittering needle and the precious ampules of morphine. Darya slid the cartridge into the syringe and plunged the needle into the soft warm flesh of her thigh. Her pale, languorous limbs grew heavily limp under the seductive caress of the drug, the merciful oblivion Rovno had so carefully schooled her to crave. The shadow of Ludovic Rovno's remembered face hovered over her: gleaming dark eyes, cheeks flushed with the hot blood of passion. Then his visage melted and it was Anton Voroshilov who closed in upon her, ardent, masterful, claiming her for his own.

Safe at last in the merciful forgetfulness of the morphine, she slipped her hand along her thighs beneath the envelope of her carelessly wrapped dressing gown. Her fingers were warm and soothing where they touched her marble skin. Small pinpoints of

heat radiated through her, sparking a deep heat in her blood. She moaned, and her mind drifted, becoming one with the flames of fire flooding through her. She loosened the clasps of her robe and pushed it open. Her hands lingered on the silky smoothness of her shoulders, descending lower to her opulent, rosy-tipped breasts. Lost in the unthinking solace of her own flesh, she cupped the opalescent white globes in her hands and felt the nipples harden as her fingers teased them, coaxing the fever of desire to swell over her in a hot flush.

Exposed and open, her body vulnerable and yielding, her hands descending, she tensed the slender, well-formed muscles of her calves, her back arching involuntarily. Her breath came in tight gasps, building into deep, moaning sobs as she found the tender flesh between her thighs and drove her passion on, her skillful fingers stroking herself beyond the turbulent pitch of desire to the onrushing climax of release.

Spent by the absolution of her desire, she lay panting on the bed. The light cast long, flickering shadows on the ceiling, shadows that danced like lifeless marionettes before her eyes, specters mocking her strength and her loneliness. Darya pulled the dressing gown closed around her. Her eyes filled with tears. Sobbing, she buried her face into the pillow and wept. She drifted into a troubled sleep.

The wizened concierge dragged herself reluctantly up the stairs to Darya's room. The unpleasantness of this exertion was only somewhat abetted by the crisp ten-ruble note thrust into her hand by the tall man who followed close at her heels. Muttering darkly, she padded over the worn carpet to the far end of the hall. There she stopped and cocked her head to one side, listening for sounds beyond the thick oak door, then rapped hesitantly on it.

Her eyes glittered with malicious amusement. "Comrade, all your trouble was for nothing. Your pretty bird is asleep. Or flown."

"Try again," the man insisted.

The old woman blinked her eyes in rebellion.

"Now!" the stranger ordered, with such a sharp tone of command in his words that the evil hag hesitated only the space of a heartbeat before obeying. "Black devil," she cursed under her breath. "Comrade Berenskaya, you have a visitor," the concierge

shrilled as she tried the door again. "Open up, there is someone to see you."

"Here, let me try."

Even as he spoke, they heard the bolt being lifted from the other side of the door. The stranger's hand, raised to strike, froze in midair.

Even in the penumbral light of the dim hallway, the concierge could see the blood drain from Darya's cheeks, and she felt the sudden tension in the stranger beside her. Without a word Darya stepped back to admit him into her room, and as the man swept by her, the concierge's eyes lit with glee.

"Bitch. I've got you now. You proud bitch," she railed triumphantly to herself as the door to Comrade Berenskaya's room closed behind the stranger.

Disbelievingly, Darya stared at him, lips parted, her breath coming in small gasps. Her golden hair hung free, its unfettered brilliance spilling down her shoulders and over her breasts. Her robe was half-open, the sash tied hastily over the billowing silk. She was naked under it. The soft orbs of her breasts rose and fell under the luxurious cloth.

"Anton," she whispered.

She had never seen him like this, his dark hair disheveled, the beard that had been a part of his aristocratic elegance unkempt, his mustache ragged. Gone were the finely tailored English suits, the polished patent boots. He wore the rough clothes of an ordinary laborer. His cap and the shoulders of his worn coat were dusted with snow. All pretension gone, all illusion fled forever, Anton Voroshilov was the son of his father—a worker's son, strong, handsome, and more compellingly virile than he had ever been in the halcyon days of his glory.

"Anton . . ." she moaned as she offered her ripe mouth to him and pressed her strong warm body against the rough wool of his coat. His arms tightened around her. "You came," she whispered. "You kept your promise."

"Are you really surprised, my darling?" Voroshilov whispered softly to her as he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Looking up into his eyes, she saw the deep tenderness and the love that he had always held for her, even through her deceit and betrayal.

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Forgive me," she murmured, and he answered, "I have always

loved you, Darya, I have always wanted you." His voice was choked with his aching need for this glorious, proud woman.

She fell backward against the pillow with her soft arms clinging to him, drawing him down upon her. In an instant he flung aside the heavy overcoat and his plain, rough clothes. Her dressing gown fell open and he drank in the intoxicating whiteness of her dazzling body. So many times she had given herself to him, offered her body—the lure in a deadly game. But now he felt the shadow of Rovno recede, he saw her need for him, and for the first time he understood that she loved him even as he loved her.

Anton Voroshilov held Darya in his arms and feasted his senses on the warm, inviting tenderness of her body beneath him. He buried his face in her fragrant breasts, stroked her long white limbs, and plunged into her pale, writhing loins with a cry of triumph.

"Stay with me, Darya," Voroshilov whispered in the stillness of the dark, shadowed room when their passion was spent.

Darya stirred in his arms. She turned her face from him and shook her head, and he felt the sob that rose in her throat.

"So he is still your master," Voroshilov said bitterly. He disengaged himself from Darya's embrace. He began to dress, his face carefully averted from her.

Tears filled Darya's eyes. "You have the men of the Cheka at your heels. With a woman by your side, they will find you."

Voroshilov was on his knees beside the bed. "Darya, my darling, come with me. No matter where we are, we will be happy in our love, we will escape over the gulf of Finland, under the nose of the Cheka. In the mountains we will be safe. Come with me, my darling . . ." he pleaded brokenly.

Darya shook her golden head and wept. "No, you don't know Rovno. He has spies everywhere in Europe, even in the Cheka. He will never give up until he has found us. We will live in fear for the rest of our lives."

Darya covered her steaming eyes with her fists. "I love you," she sobbed, "but I am afraid. Afraid of what he will do to us . . ."

And suddenly Anton Voroshilov knew what bound her to Rovno, knew what had always controlled her, even now in the love she professed for him. It was fear, and he cursed himself for the blind love that had prevented him from seeing it.

"Stay with me, Darya. He will not touch you here. He will never find you. It is your prison ship that sails tomorrow. It can sail without you."

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head like a frightened child. Voroshilov knew that he had found the truth. At last he understood. Voroshilov held her in his arms, her face buried in the coarse wool of his overcoat.

The howling of the winter wind beat loudly against the thick panes and invaded the sanctuary of the silent room. They had found each other, and lost their love in the same moment. Every second he stayed only increased her danger and his own. Sightlessly he stared over her head. He was inflamed by a hatred for the world which in his unthinking pride he had helped to make. It was a world of the strong and heartless, and a world that had broken them both and left them with nothing more than the bittersweet memory of their outlaw love. Outside, the men he understood so well were waiting for him even now. They were always at his heels, the police of the new order hunting down the kingpins of the fallen regime. He was expendable, and he no longer cared. Anton Voroshilov knew only that this woman deserved more than the fate that waited him.

Darya lay still and afraid, but as his hand was on the bolt of the door, she rose from the bed and flung herself into his arms, her body still warm from their lovemaking and her eyes moist with tears.

"I will wait for you," she sobbed. "I will go back to Rovno so that you can escape, and I will wait."

She kissed with tender sorrow the man she had come to destroy. In that final embrace, Voroshilov found the culmination of all that he had longed for. But he knew that her words held no promise of hope.

"Yes, my darling, I will come for you." He reached into the coat and held out to her a small-barreled pistol, its wooden stock scarred and marked. He pressed it into her hand. "Here, take it, my love. You may need it yet. Remember that you belong to me, that I will come for you." It was the final lie. He opened the door, and pale and disheveled, stepped into the darkness.

Moments later a shout tore through the silence of the night, followed by a clatter of boots and a volley of shots. Darya ran to the window and parted the velvet drapes onto the brutal Russian

night. Voroshilov's body lay sprawled and broken in the deep snow of the square in front of the hotel.

"Anton!" The word tore from her in a cry of despair.

In horror she stared at the body of the man she loved, and she knew that her final union with him had not escaped them. Suddenly she understood that she was part of him, part of his life, part of his strength. Through his love she could at last break the hold of the man who had enslaved her for so long.

"Anton," she whispered, "wait."

She raised the brutal weapon to her temple, and the sound of a single shot exploded through the darkness. Smiling, her green eyes wide and sightless in her surprise, she swayed on lifeless legs and crumpled to the floor. A dark stain began to spread on the worn carpet beneath her head.



In the morning edition of *le Cirque* on September 1 the following small article appeared unobtrusively on the top of the second page:

Among the passengers disembarking at Le Havre this morning was one of France's most prominent and respected citizens, Monsieur Ludovic Rovno, armaments supplier to the gallant Allied forces, bearer of the Cross of St. George and the Legion d'Honneur. He was accompanied by his wife of several months. They were returning from an extended stay in London, where M. Rovno was engaged in critical negotiations with the British Ministry of War.

The couple were welcomed by a delegation of dignitaries headed by the minister of the interior, M. Anatole Lebel. They were present to offer the congratulations of M. Clemenceau on the successful completion of the last stages of the alliance that is now on the verge of victory against the Germans. The negotiations with the British armaments firm Vickers ensured the increased productivity of the Allied plants in England and other parts of the British Commonwealth, including Australia and Canada. The agreement that



was signed was due largely to the unceasing efforts of M. Rovno, and represents the culmination of his efforts to realize the end of this long war.

M. Rovno had a few words of inspiration for the French people as the fighting against the Hun nears the end of its fourth year:

"It is with a heart full of hope and a quiet prayer of thanksgiving to the God who has watched over us during these grief-stricken years that I announce finalization of our talks with our British allies. As we wait for the victory that now is surely within our grasp, I am proud to say that together with the men at Vickers, and the leaders of Britain and all those lands beneath her, all of my energies will dedicate themselves to the last effort. The French soldier will be supplied with the weapons he needs for the final assault on our foe.

"I will not rest until the terrible scourge of battle has been routed from this precious land that has become my home. It is France, more than any other nation, which has most suffered the hardship and heartbreak of this war. Valiantly, with a courage unequaled in human annals, France and her men have paid the highest price for freedom and honor.

"My own part in this victory is small. I am grateful to perform any service on behalf of the men who at this moment face the armed might of Germany. I would gladly forfeit my own blood were it only to lessen these days of death and suffering by a single hour. I add my own words of thanks to those Foreign Minister Balfour charged me to convey to the French troops from the British people. It is thanks to them that the promise of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* will stand forever fast against the evil tyranny of our foe."

M. and Mme. Rovno are returning by train to their home on the Quai des Orfèvres on the Ile S. Louis. On their arrival in Paris they will host a series of balls for the benefit of wounded combatants.

Mme. Rovno is a recent émigré from Russia, and is the daughter of the famed and celebrated prima ballerina Tatiana.

The editors of *le Cirque* welcome back Ludovic Rovno

and his lovely bride, and we take this occasion to thank them in advance for their efforts on the behalf of all French veterans.

The article was a tribute to the modesty and self-effacement of its subject. It was an exercise of good taste on the part of the editors, who so lavished their praise upon this gun merchant and patriot that they failed to mention Rovno himself was the owner of that paper, and several others within Paris. They also failed to add that Ludovic Rovno himself had placed the article, for ends that all but one man on earth would have been at a loss to explain.



The man who held the fate of nameless millions in his hands stood as still and tensed as a hawk poised on a craggy aerie at the door of his study. The nocturnal stillness of his great mansion, the smell of the air around him, were as well known to him as the beating of the blood that rushed to his heart. He watched over his kingdom as vigilantly as the imperious bird of prey surveys the fields it has staked as its domain. His eyes were open wide in the black shadows, his gaze steady, unblinking, the pupils dilated, the deep-set orbs burning from within with an almost ghostly light. He was a tall man, thick-set and muscular, and his face was well-molded and finely proportioned, the cast of his visage stern and severe. Only the coarseness of the mouth, the slightly protuberant underlip, barred it from any claim to classic elegance. In the past months the tension of the events had furrowed his brow under the closely cropped hair. He had been waiting, patient and sure, for the moment he knew must come, and it had taken its toll. Quickly, with a movement as swift and final as the closing of the hawk's talons, the man turned the heavy glass knob of the door and walked into the immense sweep of his private study.

A crimson-gold fire burned low in the grate. Two high-backed

leather armchairs framed it on either side, each half-turned toward the rosy glow of the flames. Unlike lesser men, Ludovic Rovno did not need the momentary luxury of the warming coals, even in the chill of the unseasonably cold September evening. A far greater fire—the heat of that terrible conflagration that raged over Europe—kept him from the chill, warmed him, indeed gave him life. Tonight the warmth of his spectral hearth glowed more brightly than ever. His dinner with the British Foreign Minister Balfour had lasted late, and over brandy and cigars the talk had been pleasant and filled with the promise of a lucrative advance into fresh hunting grounds. The names which only a few years ago had been so vital to the advancement of Rovno's vision were fast receding into the past. Galicia, Isonzo, the Dardenelles—the names of these killing grounds would fade into history. But as there had always been, there would be other cries to arms, other standards raised, to replace them. There was already fighting in the hilly jungles of Nicaragua, in Lisbon, and Mesopotamia. Small battles, skirmishes, but the sharpened instincts of Ludovic Rovno told him what might be made of disruptions—just as his keenly sharpened instincts had whispered the promise of Sarajevo, of Louvain, of Reims.

The flames of the flickering fire cast their rosy light over the richly appointed room, a high-ceilinged retreat as splendid as the chambers of a king and as restrained as Rovno himself. The light danced over the polished brass fittings of the massive leather-tooled desk that stood between the tall windows. It highlighted the glass of the bookcases which ran along the far wall of the study, across from a tall, handsome rosewood cabinet. In the misty light the paneled walls of the study glowed warmly.

Rovno strode to the window, his footfall silent on the fine, deep carpet. He stood surveying the night beyond his lair.

It is mine, he thought, drinking in the magnificent avenues of trees surrounding this house, the rooftops and soaring spires of Paris, and a vast horizon beyond human vision. A world which I control, in which I am master. Rovno smiled contentedly into the still night, and indeed he had reason to rejoice. Everything he had dreamed of was at hand, everything realized as he had planned it—or very nearly so.

One thing left, one thing only which he wanted—one man whom he must duel. In an uncontrollable spasm his hands tensed. Rovno's face darkened. Rage choked in his throat, the an-

ger which he had so long controlled under a mask of patience. Then . . . was it a sound, a movement that his eye caught reflected in the glass of the window, a warning sense that roused the instincts of the hunter?

Suddenly Rovno was sure.

Without turning, Ludovic Rovno spoke softly. "Ruel, are you here?"

His reply was a soft, single word. "Yes."

Moving easily, all tension fled, Rovno pivoted. With deliberate ease he flicked the lamp switch on the desk. In its light his face glowed with welcome, with triumph.

Sergei Rogozhin did not rise from the chair by the fire where he had been sitting quietly, observing the man he hated. He returned Rovno's smile. "I took your return to Paris—and the newspaper article—as an invitation. Forgive me if I failed to announce myself properly."

Rovno smiled again. "I have been warned that you are an impatient man, Ruel. Perhaps because your line of work demands quick and deliberate action that leaves no room for planning or strategies." He shrugged. "In some circles patience is still a virtue, Monsieur Ruel, though I admit there are others as useful, which you seem to possess. Courage, of a kind. An appetite for adventure, for intrigue. Hardly admirable qualities, in my estimation, but not without their merits." Rovno paused. "Of course your . . . explosive departure from the hospitality of our friends the Turks strikes me as impetuous—quite dramatic. Thrilling in a vulgar sort of way, and by your lights, highly successful. I congratulate you."

Sergei Rogozhin shrugged. "The Turks have far too many monuments." He stifled a yawn. "They are only cumbersome relics of the past. Antiquated, unwieldy, archaic—serving no purpose. Isn't that what this war has been about, Rovno, clearing away the old useless edifices of the bygone days, deposing defunct kings and princes and sultans, so that we may replace them with the new order? Don't worry—the Turks won't miss the Yedi Kule. They will be glad of the space when they clear it away."

"An interesting conception, Ruel. Too bad for my friends that you couldn't have informed them of your plans before you lit the charges, though."

Sergei smiled rakishly. "No time, alas. The boat was leaving, and your friends are not the sort to wait for explanations.

Unfortunately, Tahir's thugs made me pay a price for the fun I had, and delayed my departure briefly, and most painfully."

"Ah, yes, your shoulder. Most unfortunate, but an honorable wound," Rovno said with mock solicitousness. "Does it still pain you?"

"Thank you for your concern. It has healed quite well, though it did hinder me a bit on the journey overland. But because of it, I was thought to be a wounded soldier, and passed quite easily through checkpoints. Save your sympathy for those who need it more."

"You mean my condolences, Ruel, rather than my sympathy, do you not? I was sorry to lose Tahir, but between us, it was only a matter of time before I would have had to take steps against him. He was on the verge of overstepping his authority. He was arrogant. A stupid, ambitious man, waiting only for the opportunity to turn against me. We are both well rid of him. In fact, you did me a bit of service, Ruel. But forgive me. I have been lax in my duties as host, Monsieur Gerard Ruel. May I offer you a drink?"

Reaching for the glass that rested on the table by his arm, Sergei smiled thinly. "You are most kind, Monsieur Rovno. But I have already made myself quite at home."

"Then I hope you won't mind if I join you." Rovno reached into the drawer of the desk and noted with admiration that Ruel did not tense in fear that he might be reaching for a gun. No, he was cool, this one, and even in his hatred of him Rovno's respect for the man increased. Small wonder Tahir had been bested by this man. Rovno poured himself a deep draft of brandy from a crystal decanter.

"A toast, monsieur," said Rovno. He raised his glass to a large portrait which hung above the mantel. It was Darya Ivanovna, caught by the artist in the full magnificence of her beauty, the vulnerable innocence captured in counterpoint to the voluptuousness of her flesh. Sergei Rogozhin had noted it on entering, and it had not failed to quicken the war memory of those nights when he had held that exquisite woman in his arms, when kisses from those lips had driven him to ecstasy, when his hands had pressed the burning heat of the breasts straining against the bodice of the gown that the painter had regretfully allowed as a gesture toward modesty. The portrait was a memorial to a woman of passion and fire, a paean to a goddess. Darya. Darya was the key to this man, Sergei suddenly knew.

Rovno glanced upward with an unfathomable look, and Sergei wondered for the first time if he was in the presence of a madman. Suddenly he was unsure of his foe. The glasses of the two men touched with a light sound, the clinking far different from the report of a gun, though both knew a shot had been fired.

"To the power of beauty, and the beauty of power. Do you know the difference, Ruel?"

Without waiting for a reply, Rovno continued, as if to himself. "One is immortal and the other is not. One is yours forever, if you are strong enough to master it. The other, no man on earth can preserve, no matter how fervently and how passionately he tries. It slips through his fingers like dust. It will desert you."

"Is death a desertion, monsieur?" replied Sergei softly with the demonic certainty that Rovno had dropped his mask and played into his hands. He dug as deep into Rovno's wound as he could. "Especially if that death is by one's own hand?"

"Some women have the dignity to choose death above humiliation," Rovno replied with equanimity. "An agent caught in enemy hands has no option but to choose the silence of death."

Sergei thought of the first time he had seen Voroshilov look at her. He had no doubt that for Voroshilov, at the end, Darya's love was final triumph over his enemy.

"Did she fall into the enemy's hands, Rovno, or into his arms?"

Rovno's head snapped downward, and the hand which held the glass jerked unsteadily. His eyes blazed with fury. "She was mine! Mine!" he rasped. "I controlled her, her being, her soul! She was in Russia to break him. It was my orders that she followed! My plan! Mine!"

"Admit it, Rovno," Sergei goaded him, "you said it yourself. Beauty falls into dust. Women desert you. You used her love to break Voroshilov—it was she who broke."

"No, I planned it! Down to the last detail. She never loved him."

"She died rather than leave him . . ." Sergei could not stop.

"What do you know of love, you fool?" Rovno turned on Rogozhin, his face contorted with rage, dark and dangerous. "You come here like a lovesick calf! Do you think that I don't know what you want, do you think that I have not been waiting for you all these months, for you to come for the girl? You poor fool. You risk your life for a woman. We are fools who believe

in human constancy, fools to believe in anything that is not in our control. Yes, I have her, Ruel. My agents of course knew the route of the *St. Helena*. Tahir's men saw to that. We were waiting for her, for our bait, at Marseilles. She has been here with me since. She is mine." Rovno laughed, the cry of a madman, a broken, mirthless sound. The eyes of the gun merchant turned back to the portrait of the only woman he had loved—the woman whose escape and betrayal had come through his heartless exploitation of her.

"Look at her, Ruel. Look. She was beautiful. If you had seen her, you would have been dazzled, Ruel. Or should we be more open with each other? Yes, Monsieur Sergei Rogozhin, I know who you are. She was not a stranger to you, was she, Rogozhin? But it was under my orders that she took you into her bed. You were nothing more than a tool. You were both weapons, you unwilling, she willing, vital to my design. But you were both responsive under my invisible guiding hand. Both weapons to my ends."

Rovno strode toward the glass-fronted cabinet, his back rigid with anger, his stride stiff. He turned the small catch that held the rosewood doors in place, and swung them aside with flourished ease to reveal an array of guns that were his pride, and his sickness. In back of the glass they were all lovingly held in stocks by gold ties of braid.

"The secret of power is in the weapon one chooses, Rogozhin. It is I who have chosen the weapons for this mad world, I who have designed them, I alone who steered the powers of Europe and the world toward this war in which I will emerge as the only victor. Look!"

In his hands he cradled a blunt-nosed revolver. His fingers caressed it almost lewdly, his mad eyes glittering with pleasure.

"A Walther automatic. See how beautiful it is. As beautiful in its way as she was, Rogozhin. A perfect tool for killing. The barrel is removable, the bushing conceals a concentric recoil spring. The British officers used it in the Boer campaign. My Boer campaign, with the weapons on both sides designed and sold by me—my war, Rogozhin, as they all have been, as they will always be. And this is a Belgian 6.35, a better weapon, faster firing, with a faster loading magazine. They clamored for them, the fools, filled my banks with gold as they played at war. They lusted for



these guns, as you, you fool, lusted for Darya's soft arms, and they were destroyed by them just as you were destroyed by her."

Rovno replaced the revolver and selected another, a heavier model, with a long and vicious barrel.

"Here. An advance, a marvel of engineering required by the times, my friend. Caliber nine millimeter parabellum, with a narrow chamber and connected to the spring charge and snail drum magazine. A Luger. In 1914 I sold them to the Persians, five thousand to the Dutch, two thousand to the Portuguese navy, five thousand to the Brazilian government, fifteen hundred to the crack troops of the Bulgarian prince so that he could join the bloodbath. Look at it! Rogozhin, look. How wonderfully it performed its purpose, how proud they were to carry it, how blinded they were by the power they thought they held in their hands. But yet it was my power that controlled them, mine alone!"

"Do you even believe your own ravings, Rovno?" Sergei leaned calmly against the leather chair. "For all your control and power and lust for beauty, your kingdom is chaos, Rovno. Death is your dominion—and I and others like me know it. Voroshilov knew. In the end Darya Ivanovna understood. They are dead, but I will stop you . . ."

Again the laugh, and Rovno waved the Luger like a wand in the air. The polished barrel glinted evilly in the lamplight. "Perhaps I misjudged you after all, Rogozhin. The world is better off without the small dreams and futile fantasies of those who believed a gun alone would bring them power. I am a realist, you are a romantic, blinded by your pathetic concern for those poor nameless fools who live everywhere in ignorance. They live in herds, in packs, guided by their priests and their politicians, afraid to open their eyes lest they look upon the truth, which is far greater than their pitiful imaginations can encompass. When the Montenegrin rebels fired their carbines against the Austrians in their midst, when the guns of France resounded against Krupp's own cannon, when the trenches of Galicia were obscured by a smoke from the shells so thick that a man could not see the hand in front of his own face, whose victory were they fighting for? The czar's, the kaiser's? Yours, Rogozhin? No. It was for me they fought. It was my hand on the trigger."

"You're mad, Rovno. Mad."

"Not mad, Monsieur Rogozhin, not as mad as one who still

believes in love, who refuses to see the truth in the world." In his hand Rovno held a small deadly-looking gun. "Here is something to believe in, Rogozhin. The Czechs carried it in their foolish rebellion against the Austrians. A Beretta 7.65. The ejection port is on the topside, the firing pin itself acts as the ejector, the magazine contains seven rounds. An interesting weapon, but those who used it best needed only one of those bullets. They were assassins, trained in terrorism. They used it because it could be easily concealed beneath the fold of their coat and yet was as accurate at one hundred meters as a rifle."

Rovno circled behind Sergei's chair. He clicked back the hammer of the gun and pressed the cold barrel of the pistol against Sergei's temple.

"I told you that I sold to both sides without prejudice. There was another group who used this gun. The Okhrana, Rogozhin, the Okhrana."

Rovno pulled the trigger, and the hammer fell against the empty chamber.

Sergei sat perfectly still, steeling himself not to flinch from Rovno's madman games. He longed to tear Rovno's throat, but not yet.

"So you do understand, Rogozhin. This was not the end I have planned for you. You have courage, Rogozhin. At last I have found a man worthy of understanding my vision. A man who is not ruled by fear."

Sergei felt the cold sweat trickle down his neck as Rovno replaced the beloved pistol and locked the cabinet. Sergei sprang to his feet. When Ludovic Rovno turned to face him, Sergei's pistol was pointed at the death merchant's heart.

If he expected to see fear on Rovno's face, he was not rewarded. The eyes stared at the gun for an instant, and locked with Sergei's. Rovno had the air of a man who has concealed one last trick, one master stroke against which even a gun would be helpless.

"Ah," Rovno exclaimed, his eyes locking with Sergei's, and a faint smile of amusement twitched his mouth. "One of my best. An interesting weapon, though somewhat ungainly. It is a Colt, American, a military model first forged in 1905. There were actually two models, one with a rounded hammer, one with a spur hammer. The two models were made in different factories. On that with the rounded hammer, the barrel tends to float. Not

much, about a sixteenth of an inch. A human failing, one that was never corrected. I see that your gun has a rounded hammer, Rogozhin." He smiled.

"It shouldn't bother me much, not at this range."

"No, not with your eye," agreed Rovno calmly, "not if my agents have reported correctly. You seem to have gained an advantage. But before you shoot, Rogozhin, there is one last thing we have to discuss."

"Indeed," said Rogozhin. "And remember that my gun will be pointed at your heart until our discussion, as you call it, is resolved to my satisfaction."

The men remained facing each other in silence. Within a minute's time, there was a light tap at the door.

"Come in, my dear," Rovno said calmly. Marina stood in the open doorway. Before Sergei had time to react, the gun merchant pulled her against him as a shield. Her head was thrown back against the starched white bosom of his shirt, her slender torso imprisoned by the arm which held her like a band of iron. Together, he swung them so that they both faced the pistol, which now wavered in Sergei's hand.

"Marina!" The cry was torn from Sergei's lips as he saw what Rovno had done to her. She was thin, her skin stretched as taut as glass over the bones of her face, and in the eyes that had haunted his dreams he saw her horror. Her face was chalky white, the eyes wide, unseeing, vacant. She wore only a loose white negligee that billowed around her in a cloud of lace, and Sergei knew it was another mark of Rovno's possession of her. It fell open in front, exposing the slender beauty of her legs, and fell to the floor around her bare feet. Marina stared at him like a sleepwalker, a wraith, a shell-shocked victim pulled from the ruins of a world besieged by evil. She seemed without will, lost to everything but the terror she faced alone. He did not know whether she saw him, or if she recognized him, realized that he had come for her. In the lancing pain of that moment he knew the full magnitude of Rovno's corruption.

"You monster!" Sergei barked. "What have you done to her?"

The sound of his voice lit a flicker of recognition in Marina's helpless eyes, but it passed as quickly as it had appeared, and once more her features became a frightened, impassive mask. She was Marina, she was his love, but she stood in Rovno's hateful embrace as though sculptured from stone.

"You should never have come. He said you would come . . ." she murmured dully through bloodless lips. "Why did you come? He waited for you. He keeps me here so that you will come."

"How well I know you, Rogozhin." Rovno's words were a triumphant shrill. He seemed to caress her fondly, as though she were his child reciting a well-learned lesson. "This is what you have wanted, Rogozhin. Do you want her now?"

For an instant Marina's eyes locked into Sergei's, and he thought he saw the glint of tears behind her lashes.

"Go," she urged in a whisper that seemed wrenched from the depths of her soul. "Go while you can."

Rovno laughed with mocking glee.

"How charming, how very touching!" He spoke to her in a silken voice. "I doubt very much if our guest would leave now, my dear. He has come so far, risked so much. Do you think he would leave now that the prize is within his reach? Besides, you are hardly being cordial to your old friend. Aren't you glad to see him, my pet?"

"Bastard!" Sergei cursed him. "Filthy bastard!"

Rovno shook with silent laughter. "Go ahead, Rogozhin, shoot! I dare you! I command you! Fire that bit of steel that you think gives you power! Kill us both and be free. Be free of me and your love for her. Leave your passion behind, Rogozhin, it only destroys you."

Marina's eyes burned into Sergei's, and her voice for the first time had a terrible life. "Listen to him, Sergei," she begged, catching at the sound of his name on her lips. "Listen to him. Shoot him, kill this evil, and kill me with him. I want . . . I want to die!" She threw her head back against Rovno and began to sob.

"She is right," Rovno crowed. "Look at her, Rogozhin. Look at what she has become. Do you want this? Do you want the ruin I have made of your woman? Can you still desire this despoiled creature at the cost of your own life? One bullet, Rogozhin, and you can forget this girl. Twitch your finger on the trigger and the future is yours, unencumbered by the past. Free of her, free of me. Forget your sentimental fantasies. See her for what she is, release her from her misery. She wants to die. The world belongs to the strong, Rogozhin, and she is weak, broken. Shoot her, prove yourself worthy to be my enemy—the equal of Ludovic Rovno."

Still shielding himself with her arched body, Rovno half-dragged her toward the desk, and sprung the latch of the top drawer. He held up a long gleaming needle so that Sergei could see it.

"Do you begin to understand, Rogozhin? Your gun, against the dangerous beauty of this girl. And this." He showed the needle to Marina, his finger easing the plunger into position. Before her eyes he moved it back and forth, mesmerizing her.

"Do you want it, my love?" he asked her.

Marina's eyes never left the shining syringe. Involuntary spasms shuddered through her. "I want to forget," she whispered.

"What do you want to forget?" hissed Rovno.

"Everything. I want to dream. Let me dream."

With her own free hand she exposed the soft bare skin of her arm, and surrendered herself to her heinous need of the drug. Rovno sank the needle deep into her pale flesh and pulled it free. With a gaze of triumph he stared at Sergei Rogozhin.

"You'll die for this, Rovno. I won't let you go now. Not ever. Not even if you manage to escape this room alive. I'll find you."

"Power is in the weapon one chooses, Rogozhin. You did not listen."

"And your weapon is the body of woman. You hide behind her like the despicable coward you are."

"Hide?" Rovno mocked. "Look. See for yourself how she leans against me. You saw how she begged me for the morphine—see how completely she is in my power, ready to obey. Ready to die for me if I wish it. See how docile she is, how her will is subordinate to mine. A woman will destroy or protect as she is commanded."

The drug rushed through her veins, blessing her with the forgetfulness she craved. Her limbs became languorous, her mind no longer filled with the shame of her possession. She was unresisting, helpless, trapped in the web of Rovno's power.

"Look," Rovno said as his finger traced a line over Marina's throat and dropped to the swell of her breasts. At his touch, she arched beneath his hand, and Rovno had the pleasure of seeing Sergei blanch with rage.

"Is this how you used Darya Berenskaya, Sergei Rogozhin?" Rovno asked venomously. "Did you know that she was mine? And you longed to possess her, did you not? You moaned into her bosom and emptied yourself into her body without a thought

for me, the man who loved her. Did you think such a woman was not loved? In your arrogance, did you think she had waited for you? Waited for you to stroke her satin shoulders, like this, to tease her breasts and feel her heart beat under your fingers, like this?" Rovno hissed. With a sudden sweep of his hand he stripped Marina's nightgown away, exposing her naked torso. "You caressed the soft skin of her belly with your peasant hands, skin softer than silk, just as her hair was more golden than the sun, her eyes brighter than the brightest sapphire in all of India, her lips like velvet, the perfume that breathed from her intoxicating . . ." Rovno's hands roamed over Marina's exposed flesh as his words poured forth, taunting, mocking, vengeful, and bitter, a eulogy of passion for the woman he had lost.

The terrible agony of seeing his love humiliated before him shook through Sergei. He knew that he no longer fought Rovno, that his battle was to reach Marina, reach the love that still lived within her.

"Marina!" He spoke sharply, softly, over Rovno's mad litany. "Marina, you are free, you are mine. You can never be in his power. Our love, Marina, that is all. All that matters!"

Marina stirred under Rovno's caress. The warm drowsiness from the morphine had erased all shame, all fear, everything but Sergei's words. Through her cloud of dreaminess, she heard him. Sergei, she thought drowsily, Sergei—here! Rovno would kill him. In Rovno's hands he would surely die. Her lashes fluttered open. "No," she whimpered. "I betrayed you. I am lost to you now."

"You were never lost to me, my darling. Never. You lived for me, even when you did not know it, just as I lived for you. The rest of the world we left behind is gone forever, this killer destroyed it, but our love is alive. It is here, now. Come to me, Marina." He reached for her, and he saw her shake in the claws of Ludovic Rovno. "Break free, oh, break free, Marina!"

"Leave me!" she cried, as the hated hands caressed her lewdly, shamefully, in the shadowed room. A wave of self-loathing rose within her, and she longed for death to blot out her torture, to release her from this shame. "Look what I have become. Forget I existed! Shoot, Sergei. Please, my love." The words were a strangled cry, struggling against the lethargy from the drug she tried to fight. "Give me death."

"Marina, listen to me. You must listen. Nothing can break the

bond of our love. Marina, you have not betrayed me. You can never betray that love—only by believing that I would not want you. I love you, Marina."

The words came to her as a command, a command which had first ruled her in the long nights of their passion. Her spirit rose against the drug and the man who held her, and cried out to the light that he had offered her. Sergei! "I love you, I love you, my darling."

With the vow of her love, her strength came in a great wave, and she writhed and twisted against Rovno, casting wildly about her, and in her fury lunged forward, her hand clawing at the desk and finding the empty syringe. With a burst of strength she raised the needle and plunged it into his arm.

A scream of pain broke his grip on her, and Marina fell to the floor at his feet. Then the two men faced each other.

"Now, Rovno. You're finished," Sergei growled. The hammer of the Colt clicked back.

"Not yet, my friend," Rovno hissed, with a look of demon fury in his face. With lightning speed he pulled a gun from his jacket, his arm straightening, aiming at Sergei's heart.

The crack of the weapons sounded almost in the same moment. But Rovno grabbed at his chest, tottering backward from the mortal wound. A bright crimson patch stained the white of his shirt. His eyes were open, unbelieving, and he reached out desperately for the life that was quickly fleeing. He fell, pitching forward onto the carpet, and the gun still in his hand fired once more wildly, the bullet tearing into the portrait of the woman he had loved and destroyed. Then the man who had brought death to millions lay still.

Sergei knelt where Marina lay turned from him, and his strong arms swept her body close to his, feeling her trembling against him, pressing into him with all the love that she would never hide from him again. A gentle hand raised her face to his lips, and their kiss lingered in the unspoken bond of their union. Against his cheek her tears of joy were all he needed of their covenant.

On November 11, 1918, for the first time in four years, the bells pealed joyfully over the roofs of Paris. The armistice was signed at last, and the Great War, the war fought to end all wars forever, came to a close.

High above the throng of delirious celebrants, a man and a woman stood in the embrasure of a balconied window, watching the exultant crowds below.

The woman's eyes were aswim with happy tears. "It's over, Sergei!" she cried.

The man embraced her tenderly. "No, my love, it is only the beginning."